MUSIC AS A BIRTHRIGHT: CHICAGO’S OLD TOWN SCHOOL OF FOLK MUSIC AND PARTICIPATORY MUSIC MAKING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

BY
TANYA SU-KYUNG LEE

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:
Professor Thomas Turino, Chair and Director of Research
Associate Professor Gabriel Solis
Associate Professor Gayle Sherwood Magee
Professor James Barrett
ABSTRACT

The Old Town School of Folk Music (OTSFM), founded in 1957 on Chicago’s North Side, has over the course of its history developed pedagogies and social practices to transform its urban, cosmopolitan students from music consumers to music participants. By the 2000s, it had become the largest not-for-profit folk arts organization in the United States, offering affordable classes in a wide variety of multiethnic music and dance traditions to about 6,000 adults and children each week, as well as a concert series, a music festival, and other events and services. Despite its scale, engendering tensions between the discourses of late-capitalist, corporate management styles and those of egalitarian, anti-commercialist folk revival values, it continued to foster and sustain intimate, music-based communities within its walls. Fundamentally, my dissertation is a biography of an institution. It illustrates the way that institutional structure and strategy can facilitate and even shape face-to-face, amateur, participatory music making, in a society where music is most commonly understood to be a professional pursuit.

The Old Town School has consistently committed to the core principle, rooted in the leftist values of the Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s, that music is a social, participatory experience accessible to all, not the preserve of a professionalized elite, but everyone’s birthright. This dissertation explores the processes and means—cultural, pedagogical, historical and material—by which OTSFM has pursued this principle. It has three purposes: the first is historical, tracing the Old Town School’s story from its roots in the 1930s through the end of the twentieth century; the second is ethnographic, examining social music-making and learning at the School in the early twenty-first century; and the third is biographical, to show throughout how learning to become social participants in music changes individual human lives.
I contextualize OTSFM’s history within several larger narratives of U.S. and Chicago music and social history, highlighting Chicago’s distinctive contribution to the folk revival and how the School has been implicated in neighborhood gentrification processes. Drawing connections from the political and popular strains of mid-century folk revivals to the rise of rock music, world music, and other trends of the late twentieth century, I argue, through the example of the Old Town School’s story, that the most enduring legacy of these folk revivals is in the musical and social processes it introduced into middle-class, cosmopolitan America, a legacy that extends far beyond the original political or aesthetic orientations of the revivalists.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in 2004-2005, I show how the Old Town School’s participatory ethos, which values music making as inclusive, social, egalitarian, and rooted in tradition, and has promoted an educational approach that prioritizes orally-based group learning, as exemplified by OTSFM’s distinctive tradition of the Second Half, a nightly, multi-level sing-along and jam session, as well as classes and other social and educational environments. This is a study of fun and friendship in music, exploring how the skills for building musical friendships can be developed in place of competitive models of music learning, and how this contributes to the overall well-being of individuals, relationships, and communities.
To the people of the Old Town School of Folk Music, past and present.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Old Town School of Folk Music teaches and celebrates music and cultural expressions rooted in the traditions of diverse American and global communities. (OTSFM Mission Statement, adopted 2001)

Founded in 1957 on the cusp of the “Folk Boom,” the Old Town School of Folk Music (OTSFM) today offers affordable classes and lessons in a wide variety of music and dance traditions to about 6,000 Chicago adults and children each week (as of 2005), from the bread-and-butter adult guitar curriculum to “Wiggleworms” for infants, djembe drumming to blues harmonica. It also sustains a popular concert series, bringing in well-known performers on the folk and roots circuit from around North America and the world. OTSFM hosts a variety of community events, such as informal Latin music concerts once a week, monthly open mikes, and the annual Folk and Roots Festival at a city park in the neighborhood. Its Resource Center makes a large collection of recordings, books, and archival materials on folk music available to the general public, and the Different Strummer Music Store sells instruments, compact discs, instructional materials and sheet music.

In casual discourse, Americans tend to use the term “folk music” to refer to a genre of music, but no single genre of music prevails at the Old Town School, though older North American string traditions and their descendants in popular music are certainly dominant. At its inception and today (though not throughout), the School has embraced musical diversity. The 2005 course catalog includes classes representing Irish, Afro-Latin, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, South Asian, Andean, Mexican, Brazilian, Spanish and Caribbean traditions, though the bulk of the offerings are devoted to Euro-American and African American traditions, of which the largest number teach music popularized by twentieth century commercial recording artists—
the single largest class is the Beatles Ensemble. Yet somehow, the many musical sub-
communities of the School remain part of a cohesive organization sharing a fundamentally
similar approach to music-making.

As a community school for teaching basic music skills to everyday, urban folk, Chicago’s
Old Town School of Folk Music has been uniquely successful experiment bringing to practical
fruition certain ideals of social music making emerging from the mid-century political folksong
movement, within the context of a sustainable institutional structure. Over the course of its
history, the School has developed pedagogies and traditions to effectively transform its largely
middle-class, urban students from passive music consumers—music participants—that is,
musicians. By the turn of the twenty-first century, it had become the largest non-profit folk arts
organization in the United States, but even those who are critical of the institution’s more
corporate aspects affirm that it continues to excel at fostering the creation and sustenance of
intimate, music-based communities. The School’s core principle has consistently been that
music is a communal experience that can and should be created by ordinary people; that it is not
the preserve of a professional elite, but everyone’s birthright (OTSFM 2004b, 5).

This dissertation explores the processes and means—cultural, pedagogical, historical and
material—by which OTSFM accomplishes this. I have three purposes here: the first is historical,
tracing the Old Town School’s story from its roots in the 1930s to the end of the twentieth
century; the second is ethnographic, examining social music-making and learning at the School
in the early twenty-first century; and the third is biographical, to show throughout how learning
to become social participants in music changes individual human lives.
The Old Town School Ethos

My initial goal in writing about the Old Town School was to discern the common purpose that unites the disparate musical activities and affinity groups found there. Such a diversity of musical traditions and styles is expressed within the walls of the School, by such a variety of people, that approaching the community there with the categories of genre, ethnicity or other typical demarcations of musical difference would not be especially helpful. It is the Old Town School way of making music that unites them—imperfectly, but sustainably. Whatever style of music people are playing, under whatever conditions, the underlying principles of musical interaction and purpose are remarkably consistent, across the buildings and across the decades.

From my experiences and observations, I parsed a set of values and beliefs that provide the basis for most music-making at the Old Town School, a set of assumptions sometimes explicitly articulated, sometimes implicitly, but widely shared, which constitute the participatory ethos that pervades the Old Town School. The term “ethos” seems best suited to encompass their practices, ideals, and affective quality, realized through social activity. In fact, “ethos” has long been a concept attached to music: “To the Greeks, music possessed ethos; that is, the power to influence its hearers’ emotions and behavior, indeed their morals” (Weiss and Taruskin 1984, 1).

Interestingly, the four components of the ethos I describe correspond closely, but not exactly, to a distillation of Old Town School values arrived at by the Strategic Action Planning Committee in 2001, the first time such values had been explicitly discussed and stated.

1) Music-making at the Old Town School is first and foremost about inclusive participation; everyone is musical and anyone can learn to play or sing or dance; everyone can learn the basics and join in at their own level, and everyone is allowed to improve at their own
pace. “The Participatory Experience” was the second of the Planning Committee’s stated values, which they described as “the friendly, spontaneous, and collaborative way of enjoying the performing arts” that OTSFM celebrates, along with its belief that “a sense of belonging and the freedom to experiment are essential to the Old Town School experience” (OTSFM 2001, 7).

2) Music-making is a social activity, something done with others, and done in order to be with others; making music is a way to find a sense of community. The Planning Committee called this “A Community of Learners,” with the goal of creating” a sense of community where all can participate in the musical experience and share their gifts with others, thereby fostering growth of individuals and growth of the folk and traditional arts (ibid.)

3) Egalitarianism is an essential ideal exhibited in all kinds of everyday interactions; skill-levels and gifts may vary tremendously, as well as leadership roles, but no one should be considered inherently better than anybody else. This carries with it a more subtle corollary attitude of anti-professionalism and occasionally anti-intellectualism—though this is never absolute. The Planning Committee did not mention this, but cited two related values: “Inclusiveness and Diversity”—of both people (racially, ethnically and culturally) and of types of music and dance; and “Openness,” an appreciation of “broad, open and direction discussion about issues at the School” (ibid.) Though these two values are undoubtedly held in principle, they are not as consistently apparent in application, and thus did not make it into my core ethos.

4) Finally, digging for roots, the urge to reach back, is an important element of the OTSFM experience. Once a student is inspired by a musical tradition, whatever it may be, the
next step is to reach back to its earlier forms, and the earlier forms of those forms, to
discover who played what and who they learned it from. Understanding the past is part
of good music-making. The Planning Committee framed this as “Creative Expressions of
Traditions,” to convey balance between continuity and innovation, believing that “people
gain strength from the power of the past and the promise of passing traditions into the
future” (ibid.)

Folk Music

It’s in the name of the school, sometimes even referred to internally as their “brand.” It’s
the guiding concept behind its creation, and for many people still labels its core mission. But the
term “folk music” is so laden with conflicting interpretations it has become effectively useless as
a descriptive tool (if indeed it ever was useful). Benjamin Filene imagines “folk,” along with the
term “pure,” as “ciphers waiting to be filled: people imbue them with meanings that have cultural
relevance and power to them,” in his study of the construction of these discourses in American
music (Filene 2000, 3). Despite the term’s ambiguity, or perhaps because of it, the Old Town
School has not only continued to find it surprisingly meaningful, but has actually influenced its
perception by Chicagoans.

Folk music is an idea of city dwellers. Whatever music happens to be played in rural
communities only becomes folk music when identified as such by cosmopolitans. It has been in
cities that the political and cultural movements, passions and fashions that have catalyzed and
shaped our understanding of folk music were created. Academic debates over the term—
precisely what criteria qualify music as folk, or whether any criteria are valid—have not tended
to preoccupy the OTSFM community very much in the realms of popular music and everyday
social music-making that are its focus. I use the term to describe certain ideas and ideals of music-making, as understood by their participants; in other words, as an “indigenous” label.

Folk music enthusiasts have typically understood their sphere of musical activity to involve the appreciation, learning, playing and singing of music that they believe to be old, collectively created and with some history of oral transmission. Most have believed they were somehow reviving old music, saving it from extinction and corruption at the hands of the popular music industry. At the same time, and more consistently over the years, folk music lovers have believed that folk music had the potential to revive consumerist youth from a pop-induced stupor by introducing music stripped of artifice, free of profit motive, created or perfected by the collective mind, and connected to something authentic. Music marked as folk tends to be simple enough to do oneself, further freeing participants from commercialism by offering the possibility of authentic experience.

The specific orientation of Win Stracke, Frank Hamilton and other core founders of the Old Town School was shaped by the politics of the Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s, and the folksong movement within it.

Win and I were on same page sociologically, we both came out of that left-wing labor movement, interested in how music reflected the cultural life of “the people.” You know, the quote-unquote “people?” But we really did believe in “the people”—and it wasn’t just people who were left-wingers or people who were working in the labor unions, it was just people-people, all types, from all walks of life. We wanted to see them partake of music on a personal level. We wanted them to make the music their own. We didn’t want to exclude anybody. Music is not an exclusive club, it’s the commons. (Hamilton interview 2005)

People’s Songs, a national organization emerging from this movement in which Stracke played a role in the 1940s, defined their name as “work songs, play songs, nonsense songs, religious songs and fighting songs….There’s only one thing wrong—or maybe right—with them—they’re not commercial. They don’t have love-dove, June-croon in them, they’re not slick enough and
they talk about life as it really is” (quoted in Lieberman 1989, 68). “The People” were even more vaguely defined; Robbie Lieberman suggests that, somewhat in contrast to a harder-line Marxist definition of “the People” as specifically the working class, People’s Songs did not necessarily consider class an important distinguisher, but adhered to “a broad, populist concept, as expressed in Carl Sandburg’s *The People, Yes*….excluding only big capitalists and racists” (ibid., 71). These definitions are consistent with the Old Town School’s attitude in practice, especially in the early years under Hamilton and Stracke’s leadership, though the School itself has never espoused any specific political agenda.

At the Old Town School of the 2000s, “folk music” meant different things to different people, but by and large, a very broad interpretation of the folk music concept held sway; its simplest expression, as Gail Tyler, Director of Marketing and Operations, put it, is “music folks play….Music I play, participate in” (interview 2005). “I just mean music of the people, any music that people sing, particularly when they’re together, is folk music,” Skip Landt, teacher and student since the late 1970s, agreed (interview 2005). This distillation of the folk music concept, and the clarity of its expression, was most common among members of the OTSFM community who had considered and debated the topic for years, most often people involved in leadership and decision-making roles. It is similar to the inclusive position Pete Seeger has consistently taken in his lifelong crusade to turn America into a nation of folksingers. To him, folk music is a process. “Face it, folk traditions will change as the folks who inhabit this earth change[….] The person who beats his breast and says, ‘I will sing nothing but a folk song’ is either fooling himself or trying to fool someone else” (quoted in Filene 2000, 194). To Seeger, folk music is a tool to activate “the people” musically. Big Bill Broonzy, involved in the early
days of the School, made the pithiest, perhaps apocryphal statement of this: “I ain’t never heard no horse sing.”

The most sophisticated definition, perhaps unsurprisingly, was supplied by David Roche, executive director from 2000 through 2006 and ethnomusicologist, after heading a long, collective strategic planning process in which the leadership honed their sense of purpose.

“Folk music” in this sense, is defined in a broadly expanded way, beyond the record-bin labeling, to encompass larger ideas of “popular culture” production—what people do and make as groups—and, in our special case, how they are taught the skills to carry on traditional, living arts in urban Chicago. Folk music, more than a musical genre then, is that poetic element that regards the rhythm and flow of culture change and setting of aesthetic norms as a responsibility of group dynamics and not the product of an individual’s personal invention (Roche, in OTSFM 2003a, 1)

This definition was actually something of a concession on Roche’s part to the prevailing OTSFM discourse; he preferred not to use the term at all, and the mission statement arrived at in the strategic planning process makes no mention of “folk music” (see epigraph, above). But his definition is an accurate description of what the term effectively signifies at the School: not a musical object, but a mode of music making.

In the wider Old Town School community, there was less consensus on the meaning and significance of “folk music”—and again, the relative clarity and sophistication of people’s definitions tended to correlate closely with the length and depth of their involvement with the School. Notably, none of these definitions concern themselves much with specifying who “the folk” are, beyond just “people”; although the discourse of the rural, illiterate Other has not completely vanished, it is more widely understood to be a fiction.

Folk music as a genre. The most common—and most shallow—understanding of the term was based on its use as a marketing category, which is how most music consumers would,
of course, encounter it. Alex Todd had been a student at the School for less than a year, and had had no prior interest in the folk music world.

TL: What does that term “folk music” mean to you?

AT: Um, *Mighty Wind*. That type of thing. Joan Baez. Woody Guthrie ... or Arlo[...]. Sixties music, between the Beatles and Led Zeppelin, or between Chuck Berry and AC/DC, that American music from then, of the sixties. It’s kind of...folkish. Except maybe the Beach Boys. (Todd interview 2005)

Like many students, Todd started out naming popular performers and one satirical film about the folk revival—products, essentially—rather than describing a sound or a concept. Marla Cohen, a lifelong rock fan, had similarly vague and product-based impressions, even after several years of deep involvement in the OTSFM Beatles Ensemble.

TL: You mentioned the name the Old Town School of Folk Music as being a subconscious turn-off. What does that term evoke for you?

MC: I think they’re gonna play “City of New Orleans” and “Down by the Riverside.”

TL: Which they do a lot.

MC: *[laughs]* They do, right. You know, I’m thinking, folk music, I guess, you know, yeah. Not that I disliked it, just that I didn’t think that would be something I’m gonna get into and learn so much.

TL: It’s not your thing.

MC: Right. If it was the Old Town School of Rock and Roll, I probably would have found it years ago. Not that I think folk music – I’m not putting it down in any way, it’s just not what I would associate with, put it together at all[...]. I’m thinking old, old mountain music, if you know. I don’t know if that’s necessarily what it is, but I’m thinking—what’s that movie?

TL: *O Brother [Where Art Thou]*?

MC: Yeah. That’s probably what’s in the back of my head, even though that’s mountain music or whatever you wanna call that. But that’s what I’m thinking, if someone was to say it to me. (Cohen interview 2005)
Again, her point of reference is framed by commercial products: songs and another recent comedy film featuring traditional American music.

\textit{Folk music as a style.} Students with broader musical experience and/or a specific interest in folk music were more likely to recognize stylistic elements consistently associated with it, though these were still predicated on, essentially, marketing labels. In other words, they were able to articulate what music so labeled should \textit{sound} like. Bjorn Krane had been playing for many years, developing diverse musical interests, before starting classes at OTSFM:

My stereotype of folk music would be based on an acoustic guitar. No electric instruments. Having kind of a variety of instruments from a milk jug to a spoon board, spoon on a washboard, to fiddle, including maybe some…I really don’t associate much in the way of drums or percussion, but certainly like a stand-up bass. So if a band has those elements to it, that also helps classify it as folk music to me. (Krane interview 2005)

To his “stereotype,” I would add a heavy reliance on acoustic stringed instruments like fiddle and banjo in addition to guitar, and an untrained vocal aesthetic not too distant from one’s speaking voice as sonic elements commonly perceived as “folk.” Krane’s experience at the School seemed to have broadened his appreciation of the social aspect of folk music, but he still brought this back to a description of style—in this case, the style of the text: “At this point, I would describe it as a way for people to relate stories and share experiences as a group, set to music. So, people can—it seems, folk music tends to relate some kind of a story or a moral within the medium of a song.” \textit{(ibid.)}

Polly Parnell was an original “folkie” who had been participating in folk music scenes off and on since the 1960s, though she was relatively new to Chicago and the Old Town School. She made an interesting distinction between “folk music” and “folk song,” which I did not hear from anyone else, but which had a certain logical consistency.
TL: So it sounds like for you the handed down part is important. But then also, maybe secondarily, there’s a style element. You could sing a Cole Porter song in a folk way.

PP: Yes. And that would be fine, too. I wouldn’t so much consider that a folk song, but I’d consider that folk music.

TL: It can be a style.

PP: Yeah.

TL: So what would describe the folk style as?

PP: Acoustic. Guitar. Not a bluegrass twist to it. Guitar, mandolin—mandolin maybe. Guitar, dulcimer, banjo. Probably not too many rhythm instruments. Not a drum, unless it would be just like a bongo or spoons or something, just for the rhythm. I guess that kind of easy-going style. It could be fast, but you know. I think the guitar’s a big rhythm instrument in folk music. I really do.

TL: So now, if you heard a traditional song in a totally different style, would you still consider that folk music?

PP: If it was handed down. If it was not a written song. Absolutely. I wouldn’t consider it folk music, but I’d consider it a folk song. Now, there’s a difference. You know, Johnny Mathis took that song, “I Gave My Love a Cherry” and made it into “The Twelfth of Never.” Well that’s still a beautiful song. It’s not a folk song. But I like it still. So it just depends. (Parnell interview 2005)

*Folk music as a transmission from the past.* Many self-identified folk music lovers, at the Old Town School and beyond, would cite the mode of transmission as essential to the definition of the term—specifically, that such music should be part of an oral tradition. Parnell expressed an adherence to this concept common among her peers.

To me, it means songs that have been handed down pretty much through an oral tradition[....] You can sing Cole Porter. You can sing Irving Berlin—all those. You can make those into a folk song. Just like you can make about any song into a country western song. But to me, a true folk song is something that has been handed down through an oral tradition. And you know what? You can write a folk song today, too, as long as you hand it down. Folk songs don’t have to be sung the same way every time. That’s what makes ‘em a folk song is they change, ‘cause they’re handed down. It’s the way you hear it. I guess that’s what makes folk song. But I like the old Appalachian songs, but that was just my
preference. But you know, there’re folk songs from everywhere. And folksongs are still being written. (Parnell interview 2005)

Steve Levitt, teacher of several rock ensembles, including the Beatles, stressed longevity as a key criterion, though to him the origin and transmission method were not so important.

SL: A short pithy answer for what’s folk music, it’s the popular music of the past, of all cultures, filtered through the view of, the rearview mirror, and then in some weird way brought back around to the present for people. [pause] It starts out always popular. It’s the popular music, always.

TL: So, for you, it has to live in the present as well[....] So do you think the Beatles are folk?

SL: Yes. (Levitt interview 2005c)

Folk music as social. One of the most commonly expressed characterizations of folk music at OTSFM, especially among those who had shared more of the Old Town School experience, was that it is meant to be done collectively with others. Mark Dvorak has taught there since the 1980s and is known for having more of a traditionalist emphasis in his teaching.

TL: What does [folk music] mean to you?

MD: People. I like the term folk music. You can teach people or you can teach music[.... F]olk music, in terms of the genre, refers to music of a social context. Meaning, not necessarily a social conscience, but a social context[....] So when I hear the term folk music, I don’t think of the Kingston Trio or the Weavers, ‘cause these are the people that sold records, I think of...here we are, these people right here. What do we know? Let’s play it. And we’re doing it for our own entertainment. And we’re doing it for our own sense of exchange, as humans[....] So it doesn’t really matter that we’re playing a blues, or we’re playing a song you wrote, it doesn’t matter to me.

TL: So the participation is at the heart of it.

MD: That’s the word. That’s the word. That’s what I’m learning. (Dvorak interview 2005)

Folk music as a do-it-yourself project. Emphasizing the participatory aspect of folk music means that the active, hands-on aspect of music making is as important as its social
dimension. Colby Maddox, a teacher and administrator, placed this at the center of his definition of folk music, valuing it independently of social interaction.

It’s music that you get without being spoon-fed by a central service like the radio or the A&R dept of a major record label. It’s homemade, something that people do because they want to, because they see no other option. They see that what they’re doing offers something far beyond what you can get from a major source, the iTunes store or something[....] It’s a human thing to want to make music and to make it from scratch. Not just listen to it as wallpaper, but it actually means something, it creates a synapse match in your brain and makes you function better and happier. Not just that you feel cool because you’ve accomplished something—managed to get a girlfriend or something—but it just does in the moment create a release in your brain that’s healthy, that you need to have as a human being. There’s other ways to get at that, but music’s a very mainline way to get it. (Maddox interview 2005a)

OTSFM’s influence on folk music. By virtue of the classes and activities it offers, the Old Town School has a direct influence on how people come to understand the concept of folk music. Although the marketing staff has in recent years endeavored to effect this change on the citywide level as a branding strategy, it is of course among returning students that folk music comes to have a more inclusive meaning. Ellen Schreiber and her husband Neil Donovan had been taking classes at OTSFM for several years and had recently become active in the Jug Band Ensemble.

ND: I wouldn’t have originally thought Dave Matthews, for instance [ES laughs], is in the folk genre. But folk music really, to me, and I think what the school sort of puts out there—

ES: [overlapping] I’m sure they had a debate about that, too—

TL: Quite a few [laughs]!

ES: when they were offering more different kinds of classes. I’m sure that the committees in the school had that debate as well.

ND: Yeah, yeah.

ES: I don’t care what it’s called! Particularly.
ND: I think the School’s done a really marvelous job of opening up and accepting all kinds of stuff. You know, “Rock Gods of the Seventies”—were there any? [All laugh] I guess there were. (Donovan and Schreiber interview 2005)

Folk Revival

A second recurring concept surrounding the School and its story is that of “revival,” a term nearly as problematic as “folk music” and not much more helpfully descriptive. “Whenever I hear ‘revivalist’ together with ‘folk music,’” Roche wrote in the Illinois Folklife Society newsletter, “I picture The Kingston Trio hunched over the prone body of Leadbelly, administering CPR, at a Billy Graham meeting” (Roche 2001). The term originates in certain ideological constructions of the cosmopolitan middle class, where the notion of rural “folk” is set up as a “natural,” “authentic” foil to the felt artificiality of modern urban life, as something to return to, something lost which needs to be revived (Livingston 1999). Musical pursuits predicated on this construct, whether academic, activist or recreational, were considered by their participants and by contemporary observers as revivals of earlier practices understood to have been seriously endangered or extinguished. Since the “revivalists” actually learned their music from living practitioners in most cases, Neil Rosenberg argues that it would be more accurate to think of these movements as transferrals of music practices from one segment of society to another (Rosenburg 1993).

As a label for a movement in American music history, “folk revival” is useful but imprecise. There have been several waves and many different strains of such movements, some based on opposing political philosophies, over the last 150 years or so. For the purposes of this story, we are concerned mainly with the linked populist and popular revivals of the 1930s through the 1960s, the period most vividly associated with folk music in the minds of most
Americans, which I will refer to generally as “the folk revival” for the sake of convenience.

Within this, the Folksong Movement was the attempt by young, leftist activists to mobilize music based in American rural traditions in the service of political goals, which became part of the broader Popular Front. The Folk Boom was the period from the late 1950s through the mid 1960s when a swell in popular interest in folk music among a new generation of post-war college students was swiftly appropriated and spread by the recording industry for considerable profit; this is the period most indelibly associated with folk music for most Americans today. The folk revival did not end in the 1960s, but folk revivalist pursuits tapered off and largely slipped from public attention, becoming more of a niche hobby for enthusiasts in the 1970s and 1980s.

Archie Green, folklorist and participant in both of these movements, confesses discomfort with the term “folksong revival” (or, “the ‘revival’ rubric”).

Yet, at that time, no better name emerged to encompass a cultural explosion, sales boom, and expansion in consciousness about expressive matters. Reaching from coffeehouse to fiddlers’ convention, lecture hall to sound studio, activists had established a leisure-market ‘folk’ circuit[…] I toyed with a term that might combine “survival,” “revival,” and “arrival”[…] We knew then of interconnections: singers within enclaved societies do retain material; lore survives. At times folk artists do revive elements of their own culture. Other cultural material moves (arrives) from special group to large society, or reversing direction, travels from national center to folk margins. (Green 1993, 66).

And indeed, without artificially complicating my writing, I have not found a more effective shorthand for this period in American musical history.

**Theoretical Terms**

I have found the theoretical frames and terminology of Thomas Turino, Christopher Small and Ruth Finnegan especially helpful to orient my analysis of Old Town School musical life.
Turino’s “four fields” of artistic practice, distinguished by the purpose, goals, and values of the activity, have been exceptionally helpful to frame my project. In his formulation, participatory performance, presentational performance, high fidelity recording, and studio audio art constitute a continuum, in each of which different aesthetic values are pursued through different social arrangements (Turino 2008). As a means of distinguishing musical experience by process and aesthetic intent, it offers an alternative to taxonomies based on style characteristics, ethnicity, or some other marker. This is particularly relevant to a study of a musically diverse, multi-ethnic organization drawing from a large urban area like the Old Town School, since it is the approach to music making there that is its defining characteristic.

The Old Town School is fundamentally oriented towards participatory performance, which Turino defines as a mode of music making having “no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles” with the primary goal of involving as many people as possible. To be satisfying for all, a performance must allow for people at a variety of skill levels to participate simultaneously. Aesthetically, the focus is on the pleasure of the musicians; non-participants might not find such a performance very interesting to listen to. Of the four fields, this is probably the one least valued by most Americans, which is part of what makes the Old Town School’s approach so unique (Turino 2008, 26).

Presentational performance, far more familiar to cosmopolitans, is the frame for live performance where musicians and audience are clearly distinguished and physically separate; the goal is for the former to entertain the latter. Though they are discrete bodies, the musicians and audience nonetheless share a musical experience in real time and can communicate directly with one another. Musicians therefore strive to keep their performances interesting to relatively passive listeners by provide interesting or technically impressive variation. Unlike participatory
performance, then, rehearsals are necessary in order to coordinate the performers and plan in advance what will happen on stage. This field is also very common at the Old Town School; not only are there professional concerts offered year-round, but many students enjoy performing on stage and include that as one of their goals in taking classes.

Turino’s third and fourth fields both have to do with recording. High fidelity music ideally involves the recording of live performances to be experienced at a later time as a representation of the original event, but also extends to studio recordings technically manipulated to “sound live” (Turino 2008, 67-68). Studio audio art is created purely within the recording studio and is never intended to be performed or heard live in real time (ibid., 78). Both high fidelity and studio audio art separate the musicians’ experience from the audience’s, and have as their end goals the creation of a recorded musical object, usually one intended to be reproduced, sold, and “consumed.” This is without question the most commonly encountered field in cosmopolitan American life today, and has been for at least a couple of generations. Accordingly, it is present at OTSFM as well; not only are commercial CDs sold in the music store, but teacher-compiled CDs are commonly distributed to students as learning aids. Occasionally, the School has been known to release a recording, such as Songs for Wiggleworms for small children (2005), and a recent, multi-disc compilation of performances of songs in the Old Town School Songbook, recorded and distributed in collaboration with Bloodshot Records. A significant subset of the ensemble classes taught at the School are oriented around the recorded works of popular music stars, past and present, such as Bob Dylan, Wilco, and the artists of Motown Records. Ultimately, however, the School’s pedagogical goal is to move students away from the recording-centered musical experience of consumers into one where they are creating their own music.
Another helpful frame for understanding music as process rather than object is Christopher Small’s “musicking.” The crux of Small’s argument is that music is not a thing, but an activity, and he expresses this by verbing the noun “music.” He writes, “To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing) or by dancing” (Small 1998, 9). This inclusive, active definition of music suits the multifaceted environment of the Old Town School, allowing us to see (or hear) the musical consequences of the work of architects and administrators. Performance of sound may be the end result of these endeavors, but much as a grade is the result of completing a course, it may or may not be the most important aspect of the experience for all involved. Though I find the word “musicking” a bit too awkward to use very much, I take to heart his insistence on music-as-activity.

In *Musicking*, Small undertakes a detailed analysis of a single, hypothetical yet typical performance of a symphony orchestra performance at a typical North American or European venue, exploring the social, economic, and political relationships between all of the participants—musicians, audience, agents, janitors, etc.—to pull out an analysis of the cultural values of Euro-American elites who sustain that musical world. An analysis of a single performance could not likewise illuminate musicking at the Old Town School, however. While there are certain elements that distinguish Old Town School performances from performances elsewhere, the emphasis on individuality, spontaneity and mild anarchy—unlike the conformity, regimentation, and reproducibility important to Western classical music—discourage the characterization of any one performance as archetypical. While Small begins with a musical product we think we all know and works outward to reveal the ever-widening circle of
performers and beliefs taking part, I start with a community in an environment and work inward to find what they do musically.

In approaching the meaning of social music activity to the individual, I have found Ruth Finnegan’s study of amateur musicians in the small English city of Milton-Keynes useful, especially her description of individual musical lives as “pathways”—again, in place of categorizing their activities by musical genres, social class, or other seemingly fixed classifications—as a locus for personal, social and expressive identity. Her pathway concept takes into account the part-time, non-bounded, yet long-term nature of amateur musicians’ engagement with their musical passions, which of course, is exactly how most people experience music at the Old Town School.

Finally, there are a couple of concepts from beyond musicology that hold some explanatory power for the Old Town School story. The Old Town School is an example of what Ray Oldenberg calls a “third place” (Oldenberg 1991). If home and work are the first and second places in our lives, the third place is an informal social setting, any of “a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (ibid., 16). Examples are church, the corner pub (still common in Chicago proper, but less so in the suburbs)—the place “where everybody knows your name,” but at the same time is safely separate from your home and work lives. Oldenberg argues that this “safety valve” is not a luxury or a useless escape, but essential to psychological and social health. He also claims that American society has steadily lost these forums both for casual social gathering, but this seems much less true in a dense urban landscape like Chicago, and represents a rather suburb-centric perspective. The Old Town School clearly provides a third-place function in many people’s lives. “So it’s the church of folk music, or
whatever you wanna call it[……] That was there from the beginning. It’s Dawn’s milk and cookies. It’s the Second Half,” Roche explained, referring to the School’s tradition of a multi-level gathering after class each evening to play together (Roche interview 2005a).

Despite its stated commitment to and visible efforts to uphold ethnic and economic diversity, OTSFM is and has always been predominantly the project of a particular social class, which one would typically call the “middle class.” I have been dissatisfied with that label, mainly because it encompasses such an enormous demographic slice of American society as to be effectively useless at describing shared valued and habits with any nuance. Social economist Richard Florida’s “creative class” offers more explanatory depth. Florida argues that the shift to merit-based college admissions in the 1960s and consequent increase in the size of college-educated workforce, coupled with the rise of the so-called “information age,” where invention, creativity and intellect have become valuable commodities in the labor market to a greater degree than ever, have resulted in a new kind of educated elite whose members particularly value personal enrichment (Florida 2002).

Although they tend to be on the affluent end of the economic spectrum, members of the creative class also include low-income artists and musicians—anyone who lives off the fruit of their mind. Richard identifies a core creative class “to include people […] whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content” but also includes a broader circle of creative professionals who “engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital.” Thus, while the creative class can be considered a subset of the “middle class,” it is not delineated solely by an income bracket, but by its role in the economy; it excludes, for example, workers in the service industries who may earn comparable incomes, but includes some living at
or below the poverty line. Unlike the true working poor, however, even struggling creative class members always have at least the opportunity for upward mobility. What the creative class fundamentally holds in common is a “common creative ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference and merit” (Florida 2002, 8; emphasis mine).

The Old Town School provides exactly the sort of environment that Florida claims the creative class seeks, outside of work and family—a “third place,” in Ray Oldenburg’s sense (1991). “[T]he Creative Class lifestyle comes down to a passionate quest for experience[…. T]hey favor active, participatory recreation over passive spectator sports. They like indigenous street-level culture—a teeming blend of cafes sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros, where it is hard to draw the line between participant and observer” (Florida 202, 166). They have the aspirations and usually the disposable income to commit resources to arts and educational institutions of all kinds, but most particularly those, like the Old Town School, that promote self-development—a constant pursuit for this class. Although the School’s community is not composed entirely of members of this educated elite, they are the dominant demographic, and the Old Town School offers an appealing balance of bohemian impulses, packaged accessibly for bourgeois capitalists.

My Story

My initial encounter and involvement with the Old Town School was quite typical. I moved to Chicago from Seattle in the fall of 2000, following a boyfriend, and found myself searching for somewhere to connect in a city totally new and unfamiliar to me. The existence of the School first came to my attention when an announcement for the search for a new executive director came out over the Society for Ethnomusicology listserv. It seemed like quite an
intriguing place, but it was not until January or so that I finally called in to see about becoming a volunteer.

When I first walked into the building on North Lincoln, I felt immediately that this was a place I wanted to belong. At the time, I couldn’t put my finger on precisely what it was—some combination of the physical environment, the cultural attitudes, and the promise of musical experiences to come. I remember being impressed that there was a café, and that you were encouraged to bring spinach pies and beer into the concert hall; food and music has always seemed a natural combination to me. I appreciated the casual yet friendly welcome implicit in the behavior of everyone I met—never a sense of active recruitment, yet you knew you could get to know people here. The course catalog was a candy store, tempting me to dabble in everything (my favorite pastime). In retrospect, I think it resonated with my college experience at Oberlin College, a small, elite, liberal arts institution with a left-wing, experimental orientation—a paradigmatic institution of the creative class. Oberlin students had a tendency to treat their entire campus like their own living room; the Old Town School felt in the same way like coming home.

In early 2001, I began to work shifts in the Resource Center under the supervision of Colby Maddox, who later became a good friend. Colby was in the early stages of re-imagining the Resource Center and I, along with other early volunteers, developed a strong sense of ownership about the collection and the space (it is still my home-base when I visit the School). I also ushered shows in order to see them for free (and very occasionally paid to see one). I took only one class that spring, an accordion class with Chris Petrakos. I also attended and worked shifts at the Folk and Roots Festival at Welles Park in July, a grand outdoor party celebrating music, dance and summer. By then I had thoroughly fallen in love with both Chicago and the Old Town School.
In the fall of 2001, I returned to graduate school. Having completed a masters degree in ethnomusicology at the University of Washington the year before, I now moved on to doctoral study in the same field at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), two and a half hours south of Chicago. My original intent was to pursue a specialization in Chinese music and find a dissertation topic in southwestern China, where I had lived and taught English several years earlier. For a variety of personal and professional reasons, however, I changed my mind. One of the most compelling reasons was the discovery that none of my Chinese topics could compete with the passion I felt for a different topic, stateside.

In my second semester at UIUC, I enrolled in an ethnomusicology seminar taught by Tom Turino on folk revivals—worldwide, but with a focus on the various folk revivals in the twentieth-century U.S. I was probably thinking primarily of the Chinese Communist Party’s use of ethnic minority song and dance initially, but quickly realized that my term paper would have to be on the Old Town School. It turned out to be the most absorbing and, frankly, fun research paper I ever wrote for a seminar, and it was obvious to me that those thirty pages barely scratched the surface of this fascinating topic.

That paper was historical and relied completely upon archival materials unearthed at the Resource Center (now properly filed, but at the time still jumbled in cardboard boxes in a storeroom), as well as a few published sources. The potential for ethnographic research, however, was clearly rich. I continued to work on the project from Champaign-Urbana, with occasional fieldtrips to Chicago, as I wrote more seminar papers and a dissertation proposal over the next couple of years, while also retooling myself as an Americanist. After completing my doctoral examinations, I was free to begin full-time fieldwork in the fall of 2004.
The bulk of my research consisted of the fieldwork I conducted between October 2004 and August 2005, with numerous short trips throughout the fall of 2005. I lived with two young staff members at the Old Town School, Jenna Murfin and Gina Kelly, in an apartment less than a mile away and immersed myself in the life of the School, attending classes, interviewing teachers, administrators and students, attending events, volunteering, making friends and generally observing the goings-on.

I tried to enroll in a representative cross-section of courses, including both ensemble and non-ensemble courses, limited of course by my own skills—e.g., no upper level guitar classes. Naturally, I was also influenced by my own tastes. In the guitar curriculum, I took Guitar 2 Skills with Cathy Norden and Guitar 2 Repertoire with Jimmy Tomasello. Other non-ensemble courses I took included Vocal Techniques 2 with Elaine Moore and Mandolin 1 Repertoire with Colby Maddox. Djembe 1 with Michael Taylor and Harmony Singing 1 with Rita Ruby were basic level classes with an emphasis on ensemble musicianship. Full-fledged ensembles, which assumed a basic skill level on instruments and vocals, included the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble with Mark Dvorak, the Beatles Ensemble with Steve Levitt, and the Jug Band Ensemble with Arlo Leach. I took one dance class, Bhangra, taught by Shamila Khetarpal. I regularly attended Second Half on guitar and mandolin.

I volunteered heavily—so much that I was sometimes assumed to be staff. I did a weekly shift in the Resource Center, as I had years before, though Colby had since enlarged, enhanced and reorganized the facility almost beyond recognition. Later this evolved into a project to sort through an undifferentiated pile of hundreds of historic photos concerning the Old Town School. Ushering concerts and other events was a useful way to witness both audience behavior and behind-the-scenes life. In addition to as wide a variety of weekend concerts as I could manage, I
also volunteered at the concerts for school field trips on weekday mornings and for Teen Open Mic. I participated in a number of instructional opportunities outside of classes, such as weekend workshops (Skip Landt’s Harmonica, Bluegrass Jam, Colby Maddox’s Fear of Commitment Mandolin, Sacred Harp Singing by guest instructor Tim Erikson, DJ Turntabling by guest instructor Danny the Wild Child), Six-String Socials on Friday evenings, and First Fridays (a smorgasbord of musical activities on the first Friday of every month).

I also conducted sixty-nine interviews with fifty-nine individuals: teachers, students, and staff, as well as people involved with the School at early periods in its history. I found everyone I interviewed open and willing to participate and surprisingly enthusiastic about my project—though in retrospect, I should not have been surprised. These people love the School—even when the love is sometimes suffused with frustration or disappointment—and are eager to share that love with someone who promises to tell the larger story. The students I interviewed all volunteered, and people with neutral or negative attitudes about the School were unlikely to step forward, so in that respect my sample may be biased. I did encounter students with more neutral or occasionally negative attitudes in other contexts, however. Staff and teachers were more likely to be specifically targeted by me. Some were elusive, but once set up for an interview, all were forthcoming. I found it easy to strike a good rapport with nearly everyone.

Interviews aside, my research method was primarily participant observation. I retained a level of critical awareness that an ordinary student or volunteer would not bother to maintain. At the same time, however, I was personally transformed by the experience. In many ways, my fieldwork kept me quite close to home, culturally and geographically; to share in the participatory ethos of music-making, however, required me to become a radically different kind of musician than I had been.
My musical background is in Western art music—private study on piano and flute as a child which ultimately led me to a degree from Oberlin Conservatory. The closest I came to performing any popular music was the occasional jazzy arrangement in high school concert band. After college, recognizing my limits, I began to expand my musical world, first by taking private lessons on guzheng, a traditional Chinese zither, while living in China. In the course of my ethnomusicology coursework at the Universities of Washington and Illinois, I dabbled in Korean kayageum (another zither), Thai jakhay (still another zither), Trinidad steel drum, and Balkan accordion and vocals. Also, at Illinois, I began tentatively to pick up the guitar and mandolin—my first foray into the world of fretted lutes. My understanding of the diversity of world music grew with my training in ethnomusicology, and my Eurocentric assumptions about musical order were largely dismantled.

My classical education had encouraged me to learn music visually (my natural predisposition) to the detriment of my ear and my aural memory; as it does for many classical musicians, music existed for me first on the page and only subsequently in sound. In the course of my post-college experimentation, I began to push myself to get beyond music as solely apprehensible through the printed page. I tried to learn by ear, to play with others without a conductor, and to be at least somewhat inventive. After a lifetime of discouragement from straying from the sacred page, I found this very difficult. And the self-consciousness, the fear of doing wrong were still debilitating at times.

It was my year at the Old Town School that freed from me the psychological limitations of my conservatory education, in ways that no university experience ever could. Finally, I found myself able to enjoy playing music without the anxiety that I was doing it wrong, or poorly, or not living up to my potential. It no longer seemed so important to me that although I could play
a Chopin ballade on the piano, all I could do on the guitar was bass-strum patterns in a few major keys with little evidence of improvement. I enjoyed the latter so much more fully than the former, primarily because I was doing it with other people. I finally internalized the concept that music does not have to be complex or difficult to be good, but it does have to be something you enjoy doing. This was not an epiphany (after all, it’s the sort of thing covered extensively at the intellectual level in the course of pursuing a degree in ethnomusicology) but something that gradually became true only through practice, as the Old Town School climate brought me into the doing of it in such a way as to eventually disarm my defenses—the self-deprecating, self-denying, put-downs that hold me back.

This is not to suggest that I then became a freely creative musician from whom musical expression flowed—my accomplishments didn’t feel much more than before (except for an improved sense of rhythm). The difference was in the loss, or redirection, of self-consciousness and inhibition. At the Old Town School it is assumed that one sings. If you sound nice, so much the better, but all that is required is lungs and some concept of pitch. The urge that I think we all feel at some level to join in on a song we know and like (usually in the car or shower) is socially acceptable and encouraged at the Old Town School. The self-doubting question, “What will they think of me?” gradually begins to lead one to join in rather than shut up. The life-changing difference is to participate with others who think this way and act accordingly.

I am far from the only one to have experienced this. A significant number of the staff and students I met and interviewed at the School came through classical music training or public school music programs, frustrated with, simply put, the lack of fun. The notion of the Old Town School as an “anti-conservatory” often came up in conversations, and David Roche liked to refer to the classically trained musicians on his administrative staff as “conservatory refugees.”
History

The first half of this dissertation is a historical study, tracing the connections (and disconnections) between the folk revival sensibilities of the 1930s-1960s with the music making found at the Old Town School today, and to document the institution’s story. Making sense of music-making and the ways the concept of folk music has been used and understood over the years at the Old Town School will involve taking a critical look at broader trends in American music and society over the last half of the twentieth century.

Chapter 2 will set the scene in Chicago, showing how the city’s folk music scene and tradition of progressive grassroots arts organization provided the soil in which OTSFM could take root and grow, and how OTSFM in turn affected each of the three neighborhoods it occupied, fueling the gentrification of the North Side as a key cultural organization. Chapter 3 covers the prehistory of the School by covering the paths that brought its core founders, Win Stracke, Frank Hamilton, and Dawn Greening, together in 1957, and how they were integrated into the national network of mid-century folk revivalists; this places the Old Town School’s story in the context of the broader national revival.

Chapter 4 describes the early years of the School and how the founders combined pedagogical, social, and sonic components in an attempt to recreate an ideal “folk-based community” in an urban institution, and how it then was challenged under director Ray Tate by the swiftly changing musical landscape of American popular tastes, to eventual decline in the early 1980s. Chapter 5 traces OTSFM’s recovery under new director Jim Hirsch, tracing how sustainability in a post-folk-revival America required it to embrace a corporate model and vocabulary for institutional development, in tension with the existing discourse of folk revival
values, a tension that was intelligently finessed to bring those values in step with the practical realities of operating in an ever-more-diverse Chicago. This resulted in phenomenal institutional growth, building the OTSFM of the twenty-first century, the largest non-profit folk arts organization in the country.

**Ethnography**

Beginning with the next chapter, my time frame shifts to 2004-2005, the period of my fieldwork, for an ethnographic examination of the Old Town School at that point in time. Chapter 6 serves partly as a transition, providing some history on the directorial transition in 2000 and the strategic planning process that followed, before surveying the administrative structure of an institution now defined by an organizational structure and a collective vision that both defined and facilitated the creative work of the individual musicians within it. Chapter 7 is a close examination of how the Old Town School ethos was practiced in the context of day-to-day teaching and learning in the twenty-first century, arguing for the importance of musical skill development as a prerequisite for musical community building.

Chapters 8 and 9 explore the social experience of music-making—specifically, the creation of musical friendships—as they are created and nurtured through Old Town School ensemble classes. The “clan” of like-minded musicians centered on the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble and Grafton Folk Club run by Mark Dvorak is the focus of Chapter 8, showing how a commitment to a purely participatory mode of music-making can be taught, and how it focuses musical energies on social relationships, as well as tracing the trajectory of a related group, the Jug Band Ensemble, into the realm of presentational performance while largely preserving the same aesthetic. Finally, Chapter 9 looks at the largest OTSFM class, the Beatles Ensemble,
examining how it and other rock ensembles engage the challenge of traversing all four of Turino’s fields, while maintaining the OTSFM’s priority on the participatory, suggesting that the creative intermingling of these modes may be the most meaningful musical experience for the bulk of OTSFM students.

**Individuals**

Throughout this work, I devote significant space to biographies. By focusing on the lives of specific individuals I interviewed or who have been significant contributors to OTSFM’s story, we can see how participating in these musical practices and adopting certain musical and social habits affect individual human lives. Part of the power of the Old Town School, part of what builds devotion in its community members, is its profound influence on people’s lives, often providing them with new direction at times of change. It is not my intention to suggest that the individuals featured here are “the most important,” or people who “count” more; they are simply examples, unscientifically representative of a vast community, chosen partly to show the range of unique and fascinating life stories found there—but also to paint a larger picture of just who makes up this Old Town School collective. There are striking parallels that can be drawn across many of the biographies. In Chapter 10, I conclude with an overview of some of the more significant impacts Old Town School experiences have had on individual students and teachers.

**Significance of this Study**

This is the first book-length history or ethnography of the Old Town School of Folk Music to have been undertaken so far. Nowhere else is its story told critically, comprehensively and in such detail. Aside from a short first-hand account of the School’s beginnings by Frank
Hamilton, the short histories of the institution that have been appeared were in-house publications produced with promotional intent, and in any case require updating (Grayson 1992, Hamilton 1991, Stracke 1967). A handful of academic studies have drawn upon the Old Town School as a case study: a Ph.D. dissertation in the field of education, initially inspired by my own work (Silva 2007); a sociology article on survival strategies of “tradition-bearing” organizations (Dobransky 2007); and a M.S. thesis in public policy on volunteer work (Sharp 1991). As an ethnomusicological study, this is the first academic work on the topic in a humanities discipline.

Fundamentally, my dissertation is about the way that institutional structure and strategy can facilitate and even shape face-to-face, participatory music making, in a society where that is not the norm for most people. While it can be argued that even among urban cosmopolitans in the U.S. today, coteries of friends and associates can and do coalesce into active music-making organizations, in fact, it does not happen easily. Increasingly, many Americans come to adulthood without any hands-on music education at all, and those who have acquired musical skills have typically done so in presentationally oriented contexts, often in pursuit of pre-professional or quasi-professional aesthetic ideals. The social and psychological habits developed under such circumstances do not automatically lend themselves to music making as a purely social activity, for fun. The fact that participatory music making requires different skills and habits is not self-evident to those of us brought up mainly within the worlds of presentational and recorded music—much less where to find a suitable environment in which to learn this new approach.

The Old Town School is not only able to offer such an education, but because it is a large, well-run, and financially healthy organization, it also makes such an education easy to find and pay for. The School’s ongoing financial strength, even in the face of the recent economic
recession, is based in its reliance on earned income (tuition fees) rather than on grants and other fundraising for the bulk of its revenue. Paradoxically, the Old Town School has succeeded in growing and thriving by finding consumer value in teaching people how not to be consumers.

To the field of musicology—both historical musicology and ethnomusicology—this dissertation offers several contributions. First, adding to the discussion on how business affects the making of music, this study looks at management, rather than issues relating to commerce like marketing or intellectual property rights, as a determining factor in how musical processes come into being. Second, it helps us see Chicago’s role in the folk revival, often overlooked, and understand the unique climate this city provides for grassroots arts organizations. Third, it brings into focus a particular swath of American music history, connecting political and popular strains of the mid-century folk revivals with the rise of rock music, world music, and other trends of the late twentieth century, which helps us understand the folk revival as an integral—and surviving—part of this larger history, rather than as merely a faded or even failed oppositional movement to commercial pop. Fourth, through the lens of Turino’s “four fields” framework for musical practice, the folk revivals’ legacy can be seen in terms of the musical and social processes it introduced into cosmopolitan America, a legacy that at the Old Town School extends far beyond the original political or aesthetic orientations of the revivalists. Finally, this is a study of fun and friendship in music. It is not unique in that respect, but is distinctive in the way that it focuses on how, specifically, the skills for building musical friendships can be developed and fostered in place of competitive models of music learning, and how this contributes to the overall well-being of individuals, relationships, and communities.
CHAPTER 2

CHICAGO: HOME TO A FOLK REVIVAL

The walk along Lincoln Avenue, south from the Western Avenue El station on the Brown Line, passed older German immigrant businesses, well-established used book and record stores, and new boutiques and bistros—a microcosmic progression of gentrification in the mid-2000s. Foot traffic was overwhelmingly dominated by pedestrians carrying guitar cases, some with fiddles, djembes and mandolins, and during the day, an unusual number of baby strollers; overall, it was clearly a six-string neighborhood. Two blocks south of the station, large purple banners announced the Old Town School of Folk Music, housed in a large art-deco building, a former public library. A working class, family neighborhood, rundown and unappealing to outsiders before the School arrived in 1997, Lincoln Square had within ten years become an economically thriving shopping and restaurant district attracting upscale homebuyers and real estate developers, and the engine of development was music.

Since its inception, the Old Town School of Folk Music’s musical life has been affected by its surroundings and vice versa; its story is a Chicago story, and it is extremely unlikely that this institution could have developed as it has in any city other than Chicago. In fact, there is no directly comparable institution anywhere in the United States, when mission, size, and age are all taken into account. Specifically how were Chicago’s unique social, institutional, historical and even geographical characteristics responsible for the ways in which people came together to establish and sustain such an institution? This chapter considers the soil in which the School took root and grew: on the one hand, the history and character of the North Side folk music scene
in which it took shape; and on the other, the legacy of Chicago’s progressive, grassroots arts organizations and schools on which it drew.

The Old Town School was not only shaped by its urban environment; it also had observably and sometimes dramatic effects on the three neighborhoods in which it has been located, helping to fuel the gentrification of Chicago’s North Side. The second half of this chapter follows the School’s migration through three (soon to be four) main buildings in Old Town, Lincoln Park and Lincoln Square between 1957 and today to set the scene for the chapters that follow. Please refer to the map in Appendix A.

The City

The City of Big Shoulders, “coarse and cunning,” Chicago is often depicted as unaesthetic, a crucible of capitalism, home to the corrupt political “Machine,” it is “the city that works.”¹ But there is a warmer side to Chicago, a city of neighborhoods, of close-knit yet ever-shifting communities, bound by ethnicity or affinity or taste; a city that works, above all, to build the structures that connect people, whether buildings, roads or institutions.

Chicago is not known for stunning natural beauty or a pleasing climate. Lake Michigan is a truly impressive body of water, though it is not visible from most of the city, and handsome trees and greenbelted rivers can be found in certain neighborhoods. But most of Chicago’s beauty is manmade, in its renowned architecture and handsome city parks. Summer is steamy,

¹ Chicago poet and folk singer Carl Sandburg coined the popular nickname, “the city of big shoulders” in his 1914 poem “Chicago”; “coarse and strong and cunning” is also from that poem. “The city that works” has been a commonly used, semiofficial slogan for Chicago since the 1970s, though it is apocryphally attributed to earlier sources (see the anonymously written Straight Dope column for September 3, 2009 for a thoughtful investigation: http://chicago.straightdope.com/sdc20090903.php, accessed July 20, 2010).
sticky and humid, smelling of hot asphalt and exhaust with grace notes of sewage. Winter brings cold that cuts through the thickest parka; evading the relentless wind on the elevated train platforms, commuters huddle under heat lamps. Spring and fall are fleeting. Not even its namesake speaks to scenic charms; the Native Americans of the region called it *shikaakwa*, meaning “the wild onion,” for the pungent alliums that grew there. Though the Illinois, Miami, and Potawatomi lived in surrounding areas and passed through, none settled there, preferring not to live in a marsh (Spinney 2000, 6). The southwestern shore of Lake Michigan did offer one geological feature with great appeal to the incoming settlers, however: Chicago straddles a continental divide. The Chicago River flows eastward into the Great Lakes and eventually the Atlantic, while the waters of the Des Plaines River flow westward into the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico, with less than ten miles between the two rivers to portage. For Euro-Americans dreaming of profit, it seemed the perfect place to start a city. Chicago was founded in 1833 on capitalist dreams, fueling the massive profits and frenetic growth that soon followed; by the end of the nineteenth century, it was a modern metropolis. The period in which the Old Town School was founded and developed was one of urban decline, with the middle class exodus to the suburbs and the gradual departure of manufacturing jobs.

Chicago’s greatness is in its people. People are drawn to Chicago from all over the world, and by and large, they stay. I was struck, in the course of my research, how many of the people I met had lived in greater Chicago their whole lives. People invest themselves in the city. They come from every place, for every reason, yet somehow they all become Chicagoans. They are shaped by the city, which is shaped by those that came before. The grid of the streets, cut through by Indian trails and rivers; the radial paths of the elevated train (“the El”); the building codes shaped by fire and politics—the two-flats and three-flats and courtyard apartments, the
high-rises and bungalows, on long, narrow railroad lots; how one gets to work each day; how
one’s bedroom is placed in relation to the kitchen; the fact that neighbors, even if from halfway
around the world, live the same way—these facts of daily life create Chicagoans. Everyone has
a part in a shared history, whether or not they all follow the same narrative. It’s not where the
people are, or who they are (they’re everybody) that makes Chicago unique, but what they do,
the structures, institutions, customs, and habits of mind they have created together.

There are of course many, many narratives weaving, crossing, diverging, and conflicting
that create the fabric of Chicago. This story deals with only a few. The central thread here is
that of white, middle and working class, upwardly mobile Chicagoans, often multi-ethnic in their
roots, but largely the product of their forebears’ attempts at assimilation. It’s a story of the North
Side, intersecting surprisingly little with the South Side, even within the relatively small folk
music scene. Ironically, the infrastructure that connects the city’s peoples so effectively serves
just as well to segregate them; freeways divide neighborhoods, and the elevated rail lines would
appear to have been designed to keep North and South as separate as possible. If the Old Town
School has benefited from the neighborhoods and musical communities in which it has nested, it
has also suffered from its inability to bridge these distances, in particular when racial boundaries
align with geographic ones. Of the many Chicago stories that will be omitted from these pages,
one of the most glaring absences is the musical world of Chicago’s African Americans. While
some black individuals and a lot of African American songs have played vitally important roles
in the story of the Old Town School and have had a profound influence on the School’s musical
life, they have usually done so only within the frame and expectations of the predominantly
white folk music scene; the Old Town School’s debt to black Chicago’s participatory musical
practices is indirect at best.
Chicago and the Folk Revival. The story of the Old Town School helps to situate Chicago in the context of the folk revival. In histories of the American folk revival, both popular and academic, New York usually occupies center stage, as the scene in which the most influential movements and people were shaped; the Greenwich Village folk scene in the 1950s, which launched the biggest folk music stars and record labels, grew from foundations built by the political Folksong Movement of the Popular Front era. Los Angeles makes regular appearances, a magnet for folk musicians seeking stardom in the 1960s and the birthplace of “folk rock.” In strong supporting roles, Boston’s Club 47 gave Joan Baez her start, and San Francisco had its folk heyday between the Beat poets of North Beach and the hippies of Haight-Ashbury, launching careers like the Kingston Trio’s and Odetta’s. Chicago is never absent from these narratives—a destination on the folk music performing circuit in the mid-century, its Gate of Horn nightclub was groundbreaking when it opened in the mid-1950s, for example.

But Chicago’s folk revival was much more seminal, and more durable, than these narratives suggest. The under-appreciation of Chicago’s contribution to this period in American music history is unjustified and based, I believe, in a retrospective emphasis on the stars of the Folk Boom and the most prominent politically motivated leaders of the Folksong Movement—in other words, something of an extension of the cult of genius. But, while a few commercially successful performers did emerge from the Chicago scene (Bob Gibson, John Prine, and Roger McGuinn of the Byrds, for example), its strength was in nurturing the social aspects of folk revival values. Here, more than profit-oriented music production, a long tradition of grassroots arts organizations and small-scale experimentation encouraged the growth of a folk music scene oriented towards local, participatory music-making, a scene whose most enduring institution is a not a recording studio or a venue, but a school.
Folk music, as an urban cosmopolitan pursuit, had its first Chicago promoter in Carl Sandburg. Best remembered for his *Chicago Poems* (1916) and his exhaustive biography of Abraham Lincoln (1926), the prolific Sandburg was also a folksinger. Born in 1878 in Galesburg, Illinois, the son of Swedish immigrants, Sandburg had been collecting songs since his teens, when he set off west on a hoboing adventure. His hobo life was brief, and he spent most of his adult life comfortably situated in Chicago’s North Side and its affluent suburbs, but he continued to collect songs for decades, performing them at his lectures and readings around the country. In 1927, he published *The American Songbag*, a carefully selected and edited collection of 280 of these songs, romantically and nationally framed with the promotional polish of a Chicago booster (Keillor 1991, vii-xi; Filene 2000, 39-41). An outspoken Socialist, Sandburg’s intent was to present Americans with their own cultural heritage in song—“an All-American affair, marshalling the genius of thousands of original singing Americans,” as he described it in the book’s introduction, lamenting his compatriots’ Eurocentrism (Sandburg 1990 [1927], xii). Significantly, he included many African-American songs alongside Euro-American tunes, as had not been commonly done before. Sandburg was especially concerned that the *Songbag* be a book of “singable songs” (*ibid.*, xiii), complete with approachable piano arrangements—to be, as its title suggests, a resource for do-it-yourself music-making.

Chicago was also home to WLS’s National Barn Dance, the most popular of the 1930s radio barn dances, variety programs featuring what was then called hillbilly music. Rather than the educated, middle-class audience typically drawn to folk music, these programs appealed primarily to rural audiences and to recently rural migrants to the cities, presenting, as Richard Petersen argues, a country authenticity based in nostalgia for other times and places—evoked by medicine shows, fiddle contests, and, of course, barn dances (Petersen 1997, 70). These
audiences were more likely to experience these memories as personal (however idealized) than a folk music audience was, whose nostalgia tended to reference a romantic Other. Nonetheless, the musical source material itself was often the same. On the one hand, National Barn Dance made use of the musical and ethnic diversity at hand in Chicago, with such acts as Olaf the Swede and a professional ballroom orchestra on standby for interludes, while on the other, Chicago’s folk musicians drew on the WLS performers as valuable resources.

Chicago appears to have played a much less critical role in the Folksong Movement of the Popular Front, which was unquestionably centered in New York; the cultural work of that political movement centered more on theatre in Chicago. After the war, however, Chicago became home to a key chapter of the folk music organization People’s Songs. Founded in late 1945 by a collection of folksingers, union leaders and other likeminded people in Pete Seeger’s basement in New York City, People’s Songs was intended as, and soon became a national organization using folksongs (loosely defined) to promote progressive politics in hopes of building a broad-based national movement. Pete Seeger described its mission as “reaching the masses of America with our political message through the vehicle of folk songs, which were their music, only they didn’t know it. As they found out about it, they would think it was wonderful, and they would take it up, not through the mass media…but through the streets and through small meeting halls and get-togethers and hootenannies, and whatever” (quoted in Lieberman 1989, 73). The Chicago chapter was underway by October of 1946, with Win Stracke and Studs Terkel serving on a Chicago Steering Committee of a dozen or so members (Scott 1946, 2). This was apparently the result of a direct outreach effort from New York, as explained in a column in the October People’s Songs Bulletin: “If there’s gonna be People’s Songs, and people singing people’s songs all over the country there will have to be branches with
offices and stuff all over the country too. That was the premise on which we decided to try to organize a People’s Songs branch in Chicago” (Landau 1946, 3). This would seem to suggest that Chicago’s was the first chapter of People’s Songs established outside of New York.

Even as this political folksong movement dissolved in the 1950s, Chicago’s reputation as home to a thriving and active community of folk music lovers continued to grow. “The people around here now regard Chicago as the center of folk music activity,” wrote New York critic and folklorist Russell Ames to Old Town School founder Win Stracke in 1958 or 1959 (Grafman 1962). By early 1958, the Chicago Daily News was reporting, “Most of the top performers from all over the country now either live in Chicago or can be found here a good deal of the time. Among them are ‘Big Bill’ Broonzy, Martha Schlamme, Bob Gibson, Mahalia Jackson, Odetta, Josh White, and Theodore Bikel.” Of these, only Broonzy and Jackson were actually Chicago-based originally. “The best explanation for the magnetic effect Chicago seems to have on folk singers seems to be the congenial atmosphere they find here—and the money. Folk artists tend to congregate wherever their fellow performers are, and where they can find receptive audiences” (Henahan 1958).

A sufficiently high density of such audiences made it feasible for a talented entrepreneur like Al Grossman, who later managed a string of 1960s stars including Peter, Paul and Mary and Janis Joplin, to see commercial potential and open a nightclub devoted to folk music, the first in a long string of such venues on the North Side. Opened in 1956, at the corner of Chicago Avenue and Dearborn on the Near North Side, the Gate of Horn was not at all the first club in the country to feature folk music acts, but it may have been the first to do so exclusively, with folk music fundamental to its identity as a venue. The Gate of Horn became a focal point for the folk music
community, providing not only an opportunity to hear new talent and new songs, but also a place to hold weekly hootenannies, where amateurs played and sang together.

Over the years, with the addition of the Old Town School and a succession of folk music venues rising and falling throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the North Side nurtured its own, distinctive folk music scene, coalesced around its favorite bards. Mark Dvorak, who has been teaching at the School since 1986 and maintains a successful career as a folk singer, educator and recording artist today, consciously saw himself as carrying on this legacy. As he was teaching himself to play guitar in the 1980s, to understand the tradition he was entering, he turned to the North Side musicians around him for inspiration.

I had learned a little bit more about the history of the School, having been a student there, and I knew who Win Stracke was, and I’d listened to Big Bill by then—and oh, I’m still trying to chase down some of the things he was able to do on a guitar. And Fleming Brown, great banjo teacher, I had his records, and I was just trying to study up on this stuff. And I have no idea why it grabbed me so. I think it had something to do with, I recognized that these musicians were the musicians where I lived. I knew other people, they went to North Carolina to be with the musicians that played the music they loved, and I recognized, well these are the prior generation, and these are the people to learn from. I was very cognizant of that. Because other people I knew, they were learning the latest Pete Seeger song, or they were learning the latest Bob Dylan song, or the latest Neil Young song, and I was going down to Holstein’s and learning all the songs Fred sang, and Art Thieme sang. In a way, it really taught me how to make a living at this, ‘cause these were guys making a living, and not necessarily in the record business. And to this day I owe them that debt, even though they never sat down and said, “Here do it this way, do it this way.” But it was just the model, apprenticeship really. [Just the other day] I was out in Astoria, Illinois, doing exactly what Art Thieme had done for so many years—you know, visit schools. (Dvorak interview 2005)

On the South Side, meanwhile, students at the University of Chicago organized their first Folk Festival in 1961, now itself a venerable Chicago institution, celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 2011. The three-day festival of concerts and hands-on workshops was an immediate success—critically, not financially—and was distinctive for its organizers’ committed
avoidance of commercial, Folk Boom stars. The watchword of the University of Chicago Folk
Festival has always been “authenticity,” with a line-up consistently favoring musicians
performing in their “own” traditions, as opposed to folk revivalists who have adopted a
traditional later in life, though these have sometimes been represented as well; singer-
songwriters generally have not. As Robert Shelton, New York Times music critic and folk music
aficionado, eloquently lauded its virtues in 1961: “In a period when the popularization of folk
music has led to many specious species of dilution and hybridization, the bulk of the music at the
festival was as pure and refreshing as a swig of spring water. The key words were tap-roots,
tradition, authenticity, and non-commercial” (quoted in Cohen 2002, 170). The musical content
has nevertheless tended to be quite diverse, with a wide range of American and sometimes
international origins represented.

The Festival’s connection with the Old Town School was never formal or at the
institutional level, but certain individuals crossed over as organizers and audience. Mike
Fleischer, one of the founders of the Festival as student president of the University of Chicago
Folklore Society, turned to Fleming Brown and George and Gerry Armstrong, teachers at the Old
Town School, for advice and assistance in planning the first festival, and they remained involved
for years (Cohen 2002, 169; Steffes 2001, 31). The two organizations frequently hosted the
same performers (if not at the same time), and Old Town School teachers have often led
workshops at the Festival (including Win Stracke, Ella Jenkins, and Valucha DeCastro
Buffington in the early years); George Armstrong’s bagpipes opened the event every year for
about thirty years (Steffes 2001, 52-53). Later on, Skip Landt travelled the other direction; he
had begun attending the Folk Festival from its second year while he was a graduate student at the
University of Chicago (and believes he has not missed one since). “There was a period of time
between 1964 and 1976 when I was Director of Student activities at the University of Chicago when I was responsible for the Folk Festival. A responsibility which I took seriously enough not to mess with it at all” (Landt interview 2005). He then moved to the North Side and began taking guitar classes at the Old Town School, eventually to teach there, but has always kept a foot in each community.

The North Side and South Side folk music circles were surprisingly distinct, and remain so. Landt confirmed that he knew of “very few” connections between the UC Folk Festival and the Old Town School. “I can’t say I know anyone specifically from U. of Chicago who was at the Old Town School,” he observed, “So that’s a curious thing” (Landt interview 2005). But folk music is hardly the only realm in which North and South occupy separate turf in Chicago; the divide is almost a city tradition. Differences in approach may also contribute to the separation, as the North Side, with its club scene and the Old Town School’s ecumenical pedagogy, has tended to be more inclusive of singer-songwriters and even pop music, while the South Side, tinged with the University’s academicism, has tended to favor “folk authenticity” a little more (though still more participatory than academic in practice). Landt agreed, adding insight into misconceptions that may exacerbate the divide.

One is that the whole nature of Chicago—North versus South Side—is such a sharp distinction. Also, it’s that Chicago people, University people, have kind of their own tradition—their own oral tradition passing along “here’s how you do things.” I think they’ve also felt, which they’re probably feeling wrong, is that Old Town School is some kind of a corporate place, because there’s a board of directors. Like I say, it’s not at all true. (ibid.)

*Chicago’s Climate for Folk Music.* As the next two chapters will illustrate, the Old Town School and the Chicago folk music scene that surrounds it were part of a nationally networked folk revival, dependent upon these connections, influences and inspirations. But they were also very much a product of Chicago and its history—in particular, its long tradition of supporting
progressively-oriented, grassroots educational and arts institutions. The civic enthusiasm that created and bolstered Chicago’s well-known musical institutions of the elite, like the Chicago Symphony and the Lyric Opera, was matched in other social realms, creating equally rich arts institutions—with rather different aims.

Jane Addams’ Hull House was one of the earliest and most well known of these organizations. Of all its community outreach activities, music is one of the least studied by historians, as Derek Vaillant argues in his book on musical progressivism in Chicago, *Sounds of Reform* (2003). In fact, Hull House supported quite a large music school, from the 1893 on, dedicated mainly to serving poor yet talented youth; a young Benny Goodman was among the many children to take their first music lessons there (Addams 2008 [1910], 242; Vaillant 2003, 123). As Vaillant points out, Hull House differed from other middle class efforts to uplift the poor through the elite arts, in its attention to the needs and perspectives of the local communities, and its leaders came to appreciate the value of promoting a certain degree of cultural diversity. In reference to the music school, Jane Addams wrote:

> The residents of Hull-House feel increasingly that the educational efforts of a Settlement should not be directed primarily to reproduce the college type of culture, but to work out a method and an ideal adapted to the immediate situation. They feel that they should promote a culture which will not set its possessor aside in a class with others like himself, but which will, on the contrary, connect him with all sorts of people by his ability to understand them…. (Addams 1910, 277; emphasis mine).

Though there is no direct link between Hull House and the Old Town School that I have found, it is easy to imagine the well-known institution’s influence, whether conscious or not, on the Old Town School’s emphasis on bridging differences through music, as heir to a broader liberal Chicago ecumenicalism. And it is worth noting that the college-educated, middle class founders
and supporters of the Old Town School were largely descendants of the kind of urban immigrants the settlement house had aimed to uplift.

Other roots to the folk music scene can be found in Chicago’s strong tradition of labor activism. Union politics were pervasive among the city’s working class for most of the last century—if not universally adhered to, at least universally familiar—promoting an anti-elitist ethos, in favor of expressions of “the Common Man.” Of course, these attitudes were not limited to Chicago by any means; the values and priorities of the nationwide Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s, a broad-based, left-wing social movement rooted in anti-fascism, anti-lynching and unionism (Denning 1998, xviii), served to bring Chicagoan Win Stracke and Californian Frank Hamilton together. As previously noted, folk music and labor politics were not closely linked in Chicago during that period (if ever). Although the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) did explicitly adopt American folk music as a propaganda tool to encourage American nativism within the Soviet-led movement and as a foil to both commercial and elite classical music, this did not mean that folk music was accepted and used by the bulk of the labor movement. Serge Denisoff argues that this was unsuccessful because, no less than the modern art music they had previously been espousing, folk music had to be “handed down to the workers as their own” and was not what they themselves would have chosen. (Denisoff 1971, 40). Communists, furthermore, did not constitute anywhere near a majority of the labor movement, despite the attention awarded them by conservatives. Michael Denning argues persuasively that it was actually jazz, much more than folk music, that served as the movement’s soundtrack; that it is only in hindsight after Pete Seeger’s and Woody Guthrie’s later popular success that we attribute stronger influence to them and their cohort in the 1930s and 1940s (Denning 1997, 329). Thus it
is not particularly remarkable that politicized folksong did not have much presence in 1930s in a city so central to the development of jazz.

Win Stracke was heavily involved in Chicago’s progressive theatre world during this period, however. Theatre in general thrived in Chicago during the Depression, running the gamut from large-scale popular productions (e.g., *The Swing Mikado*) to ethnic, experimental and activist theatre, much of which was supported by Roosevelt’s Federal Theatre Project (FTP) from 1935 until its abrupt cancellation by Congress in 1939 (Christiansen 2004). Even before the implementation of the FTP, however, theatre with socially and politically progressive goals had been emerging through the Chicago Worker’s Theater—later the Chicago Repertory Group (CRG)—founded in 1931 by a small group of non-professional actors, announcing the following goals:

To crystallize in drama the informed but pressing problems of our times. To present these problems in the most entertaining, stimulating and artistic manner. To mobilize talent and skill in all phases of dramatic activity, which cannot find expression in the ideologically bankrupt commercial theater. To build a permanent theater, technically expert and artistically sound, informed with the vitality and power of this historical movement of the masses. (Quoted in Christiansen 2004, 80)

A grassroots, participatory ethos was suggested by their intention to use “a cast of young actors from the universities, the shops, the factories, the offices of Chicago” (*ibid.*). These principles foreshadow some of the ideals and intentions with which Stracke and his colleagues conceived of the Old Town School: a rejection of commercially motivated art; a holistic commitment to involving the participation of ordinary people; an appreciation nonetheless for the development of skill and expertise; a sense that pleasure and entertainment are not antithetical to the pursuit political and social change, but rather essential to its expression; and a desire to build an enduring institution. In fact, the CRG was not permanent, but had dissolved by 1943 as its artists dispersed due to the war (*ibid.*, 83).
Another faction of the labor movement used participatory music extensively, without necessarily considering it “folk music”: the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), or Wobblies, headquartered in Chicago. The IWW, founded in Chicago in 1905, was a radical, revolutionary movement that strove to create “One Big Union of All Workers” to oppose capitalism through direct action. Marxist, but not interested in the authoritarian statism of the CPUSA, the Wobblies valued critical thinking and freedom of speech above all else, buoyed by playfulness and expressed through satire and song as much as through serious discourse (Rosemont 2002). Their political influence now long gone, the IWW logo is probably most widely recognized among activist groups today from the cover of its Little Red Songbook, continuously in print since 1909.

Though the IWW as an effective movement had disintegrated by 1920, the Wobbly way of life remained a strong current in Chicago’s counterculture for decades more. Wobbly counterculture was at the heart of a larger bohemian Chicago, which, despite its anarchic leanings, also built its share of institutions, including a school. The Hobo College was founded in 1907 by physician Ben Reitman (himself once a hobo), to be “a service station, clearinghouse and Educational Institute for Homeless men” (college letterhead, quoted in Bruns 1987, 208). Sitting at the nation’s largest railway hub, Chicago was the hobo capital, annually hosting tens of thousands of itinerant workers as they passed through riding the rails. At the Hobo College, these homeless men could find “a corporate existence and experience,” reconnecting them with a community and a cause (ibid., 204). Partly, the Hobo College provided them with the tools to defend their rights: “we seek to teach these men the elements of law and to provide them with the means whereby they can protect themselves.” Like the Wobblies’ endeavors, however, this was accomplished in an atmosphere of humor, parody and hoopla, leading the outside world to
underestimate their sincerity. In fact, the College hosted genuine debate and inquiry; the more accomplished hobo orators would deliver lectures in sociology classes at the University of Chicago, and the two institutions occasionally held debates together (ibid., 212).

The same enthusiasm for open debate and free speech, with a good deal of theatre mixed in, could also be found on the Near North Side at Bughouse Square (Washington Square, officially), where soapbox orators held forth on any topic imaginable whenever the weather allowed. Just around the corner, the Dil Pickle club offered entertainment (including music), unremarkable food and drink, and above all, “a popular forum for the oppressed and downtrodden” (Ben Reitman, quoted in Rosemont 2003, 9). A diverse and multi-racial crowd frequented the nightspot: “poets, labor editors, artists, doctors, dancers, authors, strike-leaders, lawyers, cartoonists, architects, paleontologists, explorers, news-hounds…” etc., a diversity—and a pride in that diversity—that the Old Town School also touted thirty or forty years later. Although the Dil Pickle was a product of working-class politics, it was also frequented by professors and other middle-class miscellany, including the merely curious seeking a little urban adventure, yielding it a notoriety and an influence far beyond its immediate social circle. Wobbly-esque, leftist and bohemian Chicago institutions were the radical roots for the Old Town School’s open-door, welcome-all-comers attitude, its willingness to mix play with serious social change, and most of all, its commitment to the ideal that knowledge—including musical knowledge—is an entitlement for everyone, not just the elite.

Chicago’s primary attraction, its draw for people from all parts of the planet, has always been jobs, in music no less than in other professions. Musicians come to Chicago from all over the Midwest and beyond, hoping to make it, if not big, at least make it. Miki Greenberg, the Old Town School café manager at the time of my fieldwork, talks and listens to everyone from his
vantage point at the social hub of the building. One of the School’s resident philosophers, he is also an avant-garde musician, composer and former club owner and shared with me his perceptive observations on Chicago music scenes.

I think being a less-in-the-media-glare city than New York—I think a lot of people go to New York or LA to “make it” in the big, capital Dollar-sign sense, get noticed by record companies. Dylan went to New York, he got a Columbia record deal. Would he have gotten that same deal if he’d come to Chicago? Probably not. People go to New York because they’re ambitious. (Greenberg interview 2005)

This draws to Chicago a kind of musician who is…

…interested in the music, and interested in making a daily living from it, through performance. You come up to Chicago to be the working musician who does 200 gigs a year, at clubs here, plays, who earns it, day by day and show by show. You don’t necessarily come here to make the big time, to get the record contract, TV crap and all that. Already certain types of people self-select and go out to LA and New York and I think the integrity and solidness creatively of the Chicago scene is very indicative of the relationship between art and commerce. [laughs] People who are making art to make money often make worse art than people who are making it for its own sake. Period. I’ll stand by that one. (ibid.)

Indeed, part of Win Stracke’s initial inspiration for the School was that it could support performers with a steady teaching income and make it possible for them to keep playing, something it has done for hundreds and hundreds of musicians over the decades.

Chicago’s ethnic diversity is a key strength, providing opportunities for musical cultural exchanges within and beyond the School. Other major U.S. cities share this level of diversity, but Hamilton remembers mid-twentieth-century Chicago as especially accessible, with relatively porous neighborhood boundaries, allowing him to explore Serbian and Greek music scenes while he lived there and bring some of those musicians to the Old Town School.

It’s a melting pot. […] There are all these pockets of communities. It’s probably a melting pot that didn’t melt, but they’re all there under one umbrella, called Chicago. And this is not true so much of other places because there doesn’t seem to be the free flow between the communities. Of course there’s been a lot of problems in Chicago—there’s [H]umboldt Park, and a lot of racial problems.
And the tendency of the Serbian people and the Croatian people to be very exclusive and not hang out with others—but still, they were living side by side in almost a real egalitarian situation. [...] In New York, you have real rich and real poor—real isolated communities. In Chicago, not so much. It was very easy for me, as an outsider, to go to the Greek community—at Harrison and Halstead Streets? And get to know the Greek people, even play music with them. And even [with] the reluctance of the Serbian community to embrace outsiders, still, you could do it. And they would tell you, “Hey, don’t go using our music for commercial purposes” and this kind of thing. But there was still the access—access was there. Hostility was there, but access was there. Access and diversity. (Hamilton interview 2006)

Michael Miles, the School’s program director in the 1980s and 1990s, in his mission to diversify the course offerings recalled being guided by a small epiphany that, “my God, I have the world literally at my doorstep here, in Chicago. All these rich, musical traditions” (Miles interview 2005a). Both Hamilton and Miles—the latter more systematically—were able to easily and affordably access a wealth of multi-ethnic talent and bring new people into the Old Town School to perform, teach and generally enrich and expand the musical learning experience. The School has been consistently less successful over the years, however, at attracting a multi-ethnic student body, or ethnically diversifying its core guitar teaching staff.

One of the most important practical factors in determining Chicago’s climate for folk music, as Greenberg pointed out to me, is its lower cost of living, compared with the major cities of the East and West Coasts: “It’s cheaper to find space to start a club, it’s cheaper to find rehearsal space, it’s cheaper to build a recording studio, it’s cheaper to just live as a poor starving musician. That helps people come here.” He took the Old Town School as a case in point.

I’m sure there were lots of people around the country who got shit together in their living room in the late fifties and early sixties. The difference is in Chicago, you could actually afford to rent the actual—that first location on North Avenue was something that wasn’t out of the reach of the people who were in the group even though none of them were rich. They could just find a storefront. Was that same thing necessarily possible in New York or LA? I don’t know. Is it possible now in New York or LA? Certainly not. Accessibility of just places to be, that’s a huge, huge thing. (Greenberg interview 2005)
Chicago’s attractiveness to non-commercially oriented artists; its citizens’ propensity for supporting arts organizations sustainably; its affordability for small-scale, non-lucrative musical ventures; and a strong appreciation of egalitarian values among the educated middle class—these traits have made Chicago a supportive home for creative flowering in many of the arts: avant-garde jazz, improv theatre, ‘zines. In the case of folk music, it provided a welcoming stage at a time when folk music performance was a fringe activity. As stars were created, they left, but folk music didn’t stop. Various folk clubs rose and fell, hosting a beloved coterie of home talent. But throughout, there was the Old Town School, providing a secure shelter and an organizational structure in which amateur music-making could practically be pursued, adapting to the needs and interests of new generations.

**OTSFM’S Three Locations: Riding the Crest of Gentrification**

In its fifty-three-year history, the Old Town School has moved twice, always on the North Side, moving further from the center of the city on a northwesterly trajectory. Each location was initially in a working class, immigrant neighborhood—a relatively low-rent neighborhood with only incipient appeal to the city’s upwardly mobile. Over the years that the Old Town School occupied each spot, however, that neighborhood flourished economically, attracting young professionals and the businesses that cater to them, undergoing architectural renewal, and experiencing a dramatic rise in property values and rents; in short, they gentrified. Gentrification can be simply defined as “neighborhood change resulting from the replacement of prior residents by a new, higher-status population—the gentry” (Fidel 1992, 146). Although OTSFM always represented the vanguard of this class shift, gentrification then pushed the School out, always in search of more space for less money, while at the same time becoming
“gentrified” itself, in its clientele and material standards. As Bill Brickey, guitar teacher and long-time Lincoln Square resident put it, “The School is a microcosm of the gentrification of Chicago” (Brickey interview 2005a).

The Old Town School’s first location was in the neighborhood that was its namesake, Old Town, often considered to be part of the much larger Lincoln Park neighborhood. In 1967, the School moved to its second location in the heart of Lincoln Park, on Armitage between Sheffield and Halsted, then a rather unsavory location that is now one of the trendiest, most expensive places to live in the city. Although the School ended up retaining that building and still offers classes there, acquiring more space in Lincoln Park was financially out of the question when a major expansion was required. Its home for the past thirteen years has been in Lincoln Square, a neighborhood that has been dramatically transformed over that period. At this writing, the Old Town School remains an anchor of that neighborhood, and is beginning construction on an entirely new building across the street, to expand once again.

Not only the three neighborhoods but the three main buildings the School has occupied have affected the climate of the institution. Christopher Small considers architecture to be a component of “musicking”: “Every building, from the tiniest hut to the biggest airport terminal, is designed to house some aspect of human behavior and relationships, and its design reflects its builders’ assumptions about that behavior and those relationships. Once built, it then has the power to impose those assumptions on what goes on within it” (Small 1998, 20). Though none of the buildings in question were actually built for the Old Town School, their designs have inevitably affected the tone and parameters of the musical-social interactions taking place within their walls. The Aldine and Hild buildings both underwent large-scale remodels to better
accommodate the Old Town School, in 1987 and 1997 respectively, reflecting the needs and aspirations of the institution in each period.

*Old Town: 333 North Avenue.* The Old Town School is named for the neighborhood in which it first opened, where co-founders Win Stracke and Gertrude Soltker lived and worked. Old Town is a small triangle a couple of miles north of downtown Chicago, within the larger Lincoln Park neighborhood. It is bounded on the south by North Avenue, on the northeast by Clark Street, and on the northwest by what was once Ogden Avenue (of which only remnants remain). Until the 1940s, it was known as North Town and was ethnically German, for the most part. The name “Old Town” is often apocryphally attributed to its survival of the devastating Great Chicago Fire of 1871 (e.g., Feldman 1962); in reality, it seems not to have done much better than other parts of the city, as three walls of St. Michael’s Church were the only structures left standing after the fire. After a late nineteenth-century burst of reconstruction in Victorian styles, however, the neighborhood remained relatively unchanged well into the twentieth century, escaping the trend for larger apartment buildings and giving it the feel of an oasis from another time (Browning 1957; Old Town Triangle Association pamphlet).

In 1948, the Old Town Triangle Association, a volunteer neighborhood organization, was founded to help maintain and improve the area, in response to an influx of “new residents who expected to live in the neighborhood permanently and who had relatively high community standards” (Lincoln Park Conservation Association 1956, 6)—an early case of gentrification, perhaps. Uncommonly successful, the Association built on an existing sense of community to develop a distinctive identity for Old Town. Among its many projects, the most well known was and is the Old Town Art Fair, which has been held annually in June since 1949; by 1956 it was already attracting 36,000 visitors (*ibid.*, 8). By then, the Old Town Triangle was an ethnically
diverse family neighborhood, attracting the artistic and independent-minded. A *Sunday Magazine* article in the *Chicago Tribune* compared it to New York’s Greenwich Village, but “more permanent, less pseudo, and non-Bohemian,” where “artists are accepted members of the community and even the beard wearers are good husbands and fathers.” The article paints an idyllic picture of “a gay and warm little family village,” with a strong sense of community pride—and for visitors, “a sentimental, nostalgic little wonderland that reminds people of home when they’re lost at sea in a city” (Browning 1957).

Win Stracke was one of “scores of well known artists, writers, and musicians” residing in the neighborhood (Browning 1957). His own paean to his home turf was less flowery than that of the journalist quoted above, though no less affectionate. At some point, Stracke penned a song about the Forty-Third Ward, of which Old Town is a part. A catchy tune in a spritely duple meter, it is accompanied on Stracke’s 1968 album *Sounds of Old Town* by a tinny piano and woodblocks, with a male chorus harmonizing on the refrains, harkening back to the corner saloon of an earlier day. Its chorus simply claims the ward as home:

In the Forty-Third Ward (Forty-Third Ward),
In the Forty-Third Ward (Forty-Third Ward),
I’m feeling great and I thank the Lord
That I’m back home in the Forty-Third Ward.
(Stracke 1968)

His first verse echoes Browning’s depiction of the neighborhood as family-friendly but open and tolerant of those daring enough to sport facial hair:

At the Moody Church they shout and they sing,
Of the City Foursquare where the joybells ring,
But go to North and Sedgwick on a Saturday night,
There’s not a single square in sight.

[Chorus]

No one gives a damn what you say or wear,
How you make your living or part your hair.
You can even grow your beard, we don’t care,
This is the home of laissez-faire.
(_ibid_.)

Stracke, whose German immigrant parents settled in the area when he was a small child, also highlights the neighborhood’s still visible German heritage—more specifically, its drinking habits:

In 1919, we went bone dry,
And the Deutsche beer drinkers all started to cry.
But they dried their tears because they knew the word somehow Never got through to Willow and Howe.
(_ibid_.)

When Stracke, Hamilton and Soltker decided to start the Old Town School, the easiest space for them to obtain was in the North Avenue building where Stracke kept a modest studio (Stracke 1967). But the location also made sense as a home for folk music. Beyond the arts-oriented, bohemian character of the immediate neighborhood, North Avenue was a few short blocks north of Washington Square, a.k.a. Bughouse Square. Though the heyday of the soapboxers was long passed, its immediate environs were home to both Chicago’s beatnik scene—Maury’s Book Store (opened in 1957) and the College of Complexes saloon flanked the former location of the Dil Pickle Club along State Street (Leonard 1958)—and its folk music nightlife—the Gate of Horn nightclub was at Chicago and Dearborn. Though cynical beatniks and idealistic folkies “didn’t mix well,” as Hamilton recalls—“the jazzers thought folkies were square, and the folkies, oh, they were ‘pure’”—they were nonetheless two sides of the same coin, in their rejection of 1950s middle American conformity, and both contributed to an atmosphere of tolerance and experimentation on the Near North Side (Hamilton interview 2005).

In late 1957, the Immigrant State Bank Building at 333 W. North Avenue, near North and Sedgwick, became the Old Town School’s first home. Old and decrepit, the building had not
housed a bank for many years, but instead provided the offices and meeting space for various community and political groups. Frank Hamilton remembers it as

…a big, almost a warehouse-type place, with rickety, treacherous stairs heading up to the second and third floor. On the third floor there were a couple of empty rooms, and one was a big room, where they held Puerto Rican weddings and labor meetings and in the corner over a makeshift bar area, there was a mural of a rainbow. So that was called jokingly the Rainbow Room[...]. And the other room was a fairly sizable room, not really too big, which would hold, say, two or three hundred people, and that’s where we started our classes. (Hamilton interview 2005)

Other tenants included a Puerto Rican community organization and a few remnants of the Proletarian Party—“an organization so obscure one finds it well nigh impossible to locate a representative” (Leonard 1958). On Saturday nights, the building was host to the Social Science forum, a descendant of the Social Science Institute, the formal name for Ben Reitman’s Hobo College (ibid.).

In a couple of sources, the address of this building is given as that of Alderman Mathias “Paddy” Bauler’s brother’s saloon, the De Luxe Gardens; actually, the saloon appears to have been a couple of doors down, on the other side of Sedgwick. Paddy Bauler was a beer-drinking, old-school, machine politician, immortalized for spouting the line “Chicago ain’t ready for reform,” and the saloon was where he held court. Stracke had a strong relationship with Bauler, which he leveraged in support of the Old Town School on occasion. Other shady elements in the neighborhood included the mob and drug dealers; Ray Tate tells stories of getting a little assistance from both. Once, Tate’s very valuable Fleta guitar was stolen from his “flimsy” office. “Well Win put the word out through the drug crowd. Through one guy, a one-armed piano player, lost his arm in the Lincoln Brigade in Spain during the Civil War, Eddie Belshowski[....] Eddie Belshowski was a heroin addict, and he got it back with one string broken[....] Eddie was happy to take fifty bucks.” When race riots swept through the
neighborhood (in 1965, presumably), Tate and Stracke took all of their instruments across the way to a restaurant with mob connections to protect them from the looting; Tate remembers that the guy they knew “sat there with a shotgun and a forty-five in front of our instruments, waiting for them to come in the front door. So we left them. Left the area. Everything survived” (Tate 2002).

On the creative side, other neighbors included the Second City comedy club, the birthplace of modern improv comedy, which opened two years after the Old Town School, just around the corner on Wells Street. Across the street from Second City was the Earl of Old Town, opened in 1966, and in many ways the successor to the Gate of Horn in the Chicago folk scene. Other folk-friendly clubs and restaurants dotted North Avenue and Wells Street throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, including the Azteca and the Saddle Club, all potential haunts of Old Town School staff and students after hours.

During the 1960s, Old Town was perhaps the most stable section of a rapidly changing Lincoln Park, whose overall population dropped from 88,836 in the 1960 census to 67,653 in the 1970 census, from a high of just over 100,000 in 1950. Meanwhile, Lincoln Park’s minority population was growing—African Americans grew from 1.5% to 7.28% of the population, and Spanish-speaking immigrants increased by as much as 12% or more (the U.S. Census did not count the Hispanic population at the time). Though diverse in many ways, Old Town had a relatively low immigrant population in the 1960s, compared with the rest of Lincoln Park, with about 70% of its residents native-born in 1960, while much higher populations of especially Italian and German immigrants lived to the north and Spanish-speaking immigrants lived to the west. Lincoln Park was in fact a port of entry for newly arrived Puerto Ricans and Mexicans during this period. The most heavily Puerto Rican neighborhood in 1960 was immediately south
of the Old Town School; both moved north and west in the 1970s. Just west of Old Town was Lincoln Park’s highest concentration of African American residents, but overall, Lincoln Park’s black population was proportionally much smaller than that of Chicago as a whole.

Occupationally, the parts of Lincoln Park closest to the lake and the park itself had the highest percentages in professional and clerical jobs, and this included Old Town. Not surprisingly, this lakeside area also showed the highest levels of educational attainment and the lowest poverty levels, and also had the most unmarried people (Mindes 1974, 2-33; Fidel 1992, 146).

As early as 1956, Lincoln Park was designated an official urban renewal area by the City of Chicago, part of a national post-war effort to revitalize aging and deteriorating inner city neighborhoods, with Chicago at its forefront. The program was supposed to improve the living conditions of the urban poor, but the slums, once cleared, were often replaced by nicer housing for those with “nicer” incomes—columnist Mike Royko declared urban renewal “the greatest deceit,” of which Lincoln Park’s Sandburg Village just southeast of the School was “the most glaring example[…] It was supposed to have been moderate-income housing. It became one of the most popular places for young, well-off moderns to live, if they could afford the $200-plus rents” (Royko 1971, 148). Unlike other areas of Chicago, Lincoln Park’s urban renewal was undertaken in small pieces over a period of many years; the Old Town Triangle was the first area to be addressed, and its transformation seems to have only begun in earnest around 1967. In order to accomplish traffic improvements and the addition of parks and playgrounds, 630 buildings were slated for demolition, including 333 North Avenue (Old Town Triangle Association, 1967). Today, there is a parking lot at that address for a small strip mall featuring a UPS Store and a Subway sandwich shop.
Lincoln Park: 909 West Armitage Avenue. The Old Town School needed to move. Win Stracke found a building just over a mile to the northwest on West Armitage Avenue, still just one block from an El station, only one stop up from the old location (and still within the Forty-Third Ward, barely). The School moved in August of 1968 and reopened a month later. The purchase was financed with funds raised from a concert and a festival (the latter underwritten by the Illinois Sesquicentennial Commission), the Old Town Triangle Association, the Newport Festival Foundation (a loan), and numerous small private gifts, ranging from $5 to $250 (Grayson 1992, 22).

The new building was an aging gingerbread confection built in 1896, with a rounded turret centered on the façade of the second story. Painted across the top of the turret were (and still are) the words “The Aldine,” though no one seems to know the origin of the name. Over the decades, the Aldine had housed many businesses, including horseshoe smiths in the 1920s, and more recently, various bars and boarding houses. It was showing its age by the late 1960s and consequently, as folksinger Art Thieme recalled, “The new location didn’t feel much different. But it had a lot more space and the building was more organized” (Kraut 2002). In its new space, the Old Town School had an approximately 15,000-square-foot, two-story building all to themselves, with space for several classrooms, studios and offices, as well as a small concert stage. The Old Town Folklore Center, a music store Stracke had opened in 1963, at first occupied part of the ground floor. Skip Landt shared with me his “classic description” of the layout of the building in those days and the state of decay it had reached when he first saw it about ten years later.

When I first came to the School in the late seventies at the other location, when you walk in what is now the front door, you could only turn right. There was the door to the other side that was closed. Anyway, the point was you turn right into the office area. Right by the front window was an overstuffed couch. Always
covered with *Reader* newspapers. Stacks of *Readers*. Which was good, because if anybody sat—it had never been cleaned or dusted or anything, so if anyone sat down it, there would be an enormous puff of dust, so it simply was a storage place for those. (Landt interview 2005)

Rather than a counter, the office had a large, wooden office desk. Landt remembers…

… an Indian woman sitting behind it. As I remember, dressed in fairly traditional garb, at that point there was nothing like that kind of music in the place. And the money was kept in a desk drawer, in just a metal box. That’s where you would sign up for classes or get refunds or whatever. Then just past her, over here, was a potbelly stove, kind of the phony folk idea, which of course wasn’t connected to anything. At that point, around the corner, you could actually see the stairs from there, but some place, anyway, the stairs went up and as you went up, there were holes in the wall. But the best, the most graphic thing, was in the next room—the big room that’s still out there, kind of a lobby, in the back of was men’s room, in which they had a urinal that was—I don’t know if they make urinals that are a long, tub-like things that run, with water constantly dripping into it, or whether it was a feeding trough of some kind, but it was absolutely disgusting. (*ibid.*)

The classrooms were upstairs, and haphazardly arranged. “The chairs upstairs, many of them were clearly leftovers from the day when there had been a bar or tavern there or nearby, because they were all a set of old broken chairs, some of which were of a style with the bent wood, but all were elderly. There certainly wasn’t anything like any sort of setup arrangements[…]” (*ibid.*)

The building served well, if humbly, for several years, but by the mid-1980s, its deterioration had reached a crisis point. By this time, Jim Hirsch was at the helm and ready to apply his newfound fundraising talents to the task. The decision to renovate the Aldine was, in his words, an “absolutely pivotal moment,” and resulted in the Old Town School’s first major capital campaign. They really had no choice but to remodel, however. “We were lucky that the floor didn’t collapse in the concert hall. I mean, seriously. That building was a death trap. We were *lucky*[…] The fact that anybody ever came there was remarkable.” There was no air conditioning, and Hirsch recalls some women in his summer classes being close to tears the heat was so uncomfortable. He, too, found the men’s restroom unforgettable: “It really, literally
smelled like somebody had died in the men’s bathroom, and was just shoved under the floorboards. It was just disgusting.” Hirsch recalled with a smile, “You had to be such a committed lunatic to either work there or want to go there back in those days” (Hirsch interview, 2005). This state of affairs was doing nothing to attract new students or endear the institution to the surrounding neighborhood.

In 1985, the OTSFM Board of Directors made the decision to renovate and hired one of their own, architect Fritz Biederman, to do the job. The renovation amounted pretty nearly to a gut rehab, with redesigning the floorplan, replacing much of the heating, plumbing, and electrical systems, installing new telephone and fire alarm systems, reroofing the entire building (including a new copper roof for the turret), refurbishing and replacing all the interior woodwork, replacing all the windows and the staircase, improving the acoustics, and of course installing new restrooms. All of this was accomplished for about half a million dollars. In the new floorplan, the front entrance opened up into the central lobby, “a space to encourage the spirit and spontaneity of music.” The lobby prefaced a much improved concert hall with a new sound booth and seating for three hundred. Upstairs, a new museum and resource center was to house a collection of antique banjos, as well as other exhibits and memorabilia. A dozen classrooms and studios were now available on the second floor and in the basement (which had previously been unusable), and the administrative staff now had four upstairs offices in addition to the front desk near the front door (OTSFM 1985). Significantly, the ground-floor façade of the building, which had until then been covered with wood siding, giving the School a private, closed-off feeling, was fitted with large plate glass windows, opening it up to the street with an implicit welcome.

The remodel was not without shortcomings, however. In particular, the soundproofing was not up to the standard needed for a building where multiple musical activities would be
happening simultaneously. The concert hall acoustics were less than ideal and structural pillars remained, blocking sightlines; a newspaper reporter recalled attending concerts there “akin to sitting in a badly ventilated cave,” mitigated only by the powerful aura of nostalgia the space held (Houlihan-Skilton 1998). “There were things that we understood about how a music school/facility-slash-concert space should function that [the architects] don’t know because they didn’t live with it every day,” Jim Hirsch recalled (interview 2005). Since Biederman was on the Board of the Old Town School, this became a sensitive issue, especially when his firm unsuccessfully bid for the renovation of the School’s next location. But in then-administrator Elaine Moore’s view, considering how little money he had to work with he did quite well with the Armitage building (E. Moore interview 2005a).

During the renovation, the Old Town School had taken up temporary residence in the Irish American Heritage Center, occupying a sprawling former public school six miles up the freeway to the northwest, with ample space to share. Michael Miles, then program director, recalls it as “a pretty low point” for the School, and “a crummy place” to be (Miles interview 2005a). Elaine Moore was first hired at the Old Town School as a receptionist during this period and recalls her first impression: “I…walked into this big empty building, that was half torn apart, and there was this sad-looking little metal desk sitting in hallway, with a phone on it, and a guy sitting there doing crossword puzzle….it was the entire office in one little desk, and I thought ‘this is pathetic’” (Moore interview 2005a). Although the School had lost a lot of students and staff during this six-month period, they not only recouped their losses immediately upon their return to Armitage, but embarked on a ten-year period of unprecedented growth. “When we moved back in, I remember thinking to myself, well this is going to hold us for ten years. We
had to buy another building two years later [at 939 Armitage]. And we filled that, like, in minutes” (Hirsch interview 2005).

Meanwhile, Lincoln Park was booming as well. The Aldine was situated in the heart of the Lincoln Park, an officially designated “Community Area” and ostensibly a neighborhood, but with a population the size of a small city. “No one considers the geographic area of Lincoln Park a community,” wrote a researcher several years earlier (Mindes 1974, 63). Rather, Lincoln Park has always been “a diverse set of neighborhoods,” as we’ve already seen in the above portrait of Old Town. Under the forces of gentrification, however, that diversity has leveled somewhat.

The central Lincoln Park area in which the Old Town School has been located since 1967 had just begun to gentrify by the time the School moved in. The central neighborhood followed the classic pattern of gentrification, where upper-middle-class cosmopolitans are attracted to a decaying neighborhood that had once been a high-status one by the investment potential of its large, inexpensive homes and its convenient location (Mindes 1974, 147). In 1967, however, it was the decay that was more immediately apparent to local residents, and the overall population of Lincoln Park was in steady decline. A report by the local branch of the Chicago Public Library described the neighborhood as having “modest homes, shops and a variety of industrial buildings. Many of these are growing old and shabby […. with a] high percentage of transients.” The report noted a decline in adult circulation due to increase in Spanish-speaking families with low literacy and the demolition of homes for urban renewal, pushing people out, and a growing nervousness about crime. “With all the disturbances last year—the constant hold-ups and breaking in of places—many business places have either moved or closed [….] There are those who still come, but most people are afraid to come out after dark” (Chicago Public Library
As late as the 1980s and into the 1990s, crime was a serious concern around the Old Town School, as teacher Bill Brickey, who began teaching guitar at OTSFM in 1989, recalls. I mean up until the School started booming, even while we were there, we had at least two women that got raped underneath the El tracks, right? And that’s at Armitage and Sheffield, so it’s not like they were raped in some dark alley or something, they were relatively close to a lot of stuff going on. And so that was really harsh for all of us, to think, students are coming here and they’re walking down the street having to deal with this. (Brickey interview 2005a)

At the same time, average household size was decreasing as the neighborhood lost its family population and began to attract more young, single people—a sign of the coming gentrification. The population of Lincoln Park began to grow again in the 1980s, anticipating the rebound of Chicago’s overall population in the next decade. In 1960, the social status of central Lincoln Park’s residents was not dramatically different from that of the city as a whole—only 8.4% were college graduates, for example. Over the next twenty years, however, the percentage of college graduates in the neighborhood would increase more than seven-fold, and the percentage of the population between the ages of twenty and thirty-four (“Baby Boomers”) would more than double, and by 1980, 40% of adults there had never been married—all this as the population had dropped by almost half (Fidel 1992, 160). At the same time, the racial and ethnic diversity of the neighborhood shifted—the black population actually saw relative increase between 1960 to 1980 and only a slight decline in the twenty years that followed, while the Hispanic population declined by somewhat more, after what was probably a high point in 1970 (Fidel 1992, Mindes 1964). That said, Lincoln Park was at no point a significantly multi-racial area—74% white in 1970 and 84.5% white in 2000—contrasting sharply with the demographic trends of the city as a whole which, in the 2000 census, showed a population only 31.3% non-Hispanic white (Voorees Center, n.d.).
The gentrification of Lincoln Park accelerated between 1980 and 2000, by which time it was considered one of the city’s most desirable and expensive neighborhoods. According to U.S. Census data, the median house value in Lincoln Park increased twenty-six-fold between 1970, when it was $19,500, and 2000, when it reached $518,063 (compared with $144,300 city-wide). The community’s median family income rose steadily, from $9,652 in 1970 to $132,984 in 2000—or about three and a half times that of Chicago as a whole. This income was being drawn by a population that was 78% college educated by the turn of the millenium. Although this affluent, educated white population was precisely whom the Old Town School owed its growth and prosperity to, even a healthy non-profit arts organization struggled not only to meet its needs in such an expensive neighborhood, but simply to fit in. The Old Town School’s bohemian vibe was not as welcome as it had been—“I can remember getting in huge arguments with other teachers about whether or not people should be allowed to play on sidewalk on Armitage Ave because didn’t look good,” Brickey recalls (interview 2005a). Nor did the students and teachers feel welcomed any more, as residents or visitors.

There used to be an old hardware store—what do you call those?—an office supply store on the corner. Right underneath the El tracks. That disappeared and turned into a store. I’ll never forget this experience, walking in there—’cause I’d just had kids—and I saw that they had kids clothes, and I said, “Ah, that’s great.” And I’m in there and I was looking for kids clothes. And they wanted $60 for a thermal shirt for a three-year-old. You know, it was this big. And I was looking at it—$60! And I was walking around the store, and it was like, they are out of their minds! The people that I knew that were in the neighborhood? They couldn’t afford anything like that. Why would you put a shop like that there? Well, I didn’t understand regentrification then, and of course the whole neighborhood slowly put these shops in that only certain people could afford to shop there. (ibid.)

*Lincoln Square: 4544 N. Lincoln.* By 1992 or 1993, as Jim Hirsch recalls, it was apparent that the Old Town School had run out of space, even with the purchase of a second building on Armitage around 1989. Although the School was benefiting from gentrification—
new “creative class” residents had more disposable income and interests in “self-improvement,” and the area was also attracting upwardly-mobile residents from elsewhere for shopping and entertainment—it was no longer possible for many of the students and teachers to live nearby. Because of the growing density of the neighborhood, scarce parking had become a serious problem. When the offer of an old Chicago Library building came from the City, Hirsch jumped at the chance (see Chapter 5). In 1998 the Old Town School moved into the newly rehabilitated Hild Library building in the Lincoln Square neighborhood, after months of work and planning.

The Frederick H. Hild Regional Branch of the Chicago Public Library was originally built in 1931 at a cost of about $200,000. Named for a former librarian, it was only the library system’s second regional branch (as opposed to smaller, local branches); the largest yet, serving an area of fifty square miles and with a capacity for 80,000 volumes; and had the city’s first children’s department (CPL Annual Reports, 1930 and 1931). Designed by little-known architect Pierre Blouke, the 40,000-square-foot, Art Deco building was oriented around a semi-circular reading room illuminated by tall windows marching along the curved wall, with the circulation desk in the center; the children’s department was on the second floor of this area. The two large murals still intact above the concert stage and in the second-floor hallway were painted for the children’s department by Francis T. Coan, supported by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), not long after his graduation from the School of the Art Institute some time in the 1930s (Gray 2001, 423). Depicting scenes of children’s activities and imaginative worlds, they are classic examples of the WPA style, evoking an optimistic view of the future, where modern technology and history unite.

In 1985, the Hild Library was replaced by the new, larger Sulzer Regional Library, built just one block south on Lincoln Avenue. The Hild was at first slated to become a warehouse for
the library system, but the local community, led by Alderman Gene Schulter, objected strenuously and wanted to keep the attractive building in use as a public space. At first they envisioned a “community art space” occupied by a handful of non-profits, but lack of funding and the City’s unwillingness to support such an unstable model stalled that plan, and it remained empty and neglected (Ryan 1996). By the time the City and the Old Town School found mutual opportunity in each other around 1994, it had deteriorated dramatically; Elaine Moore remembers, “It was exciting, because we walked into this building and it was e-nor-mous! And it looked like it had been hit by a bomb! […] It’s really outrageous what ten years of neglect can do” (Moore interview 2005a). But the building’s potential was immediately clear to the OTSFM staff on that first visit: “the building was dynamite. I mean, you could just tell that from the get-go” (Hirsch interview 2005).

The four-member committee put a lot of thought into the selection of an architect to resurrect the Hild, touring past projects by the eight bidders all around the city. “There was a desire to pick someone who would obviously respect the Old Town School as being this traditional music place” (Moore interview 2005a). The winning firm, Wheeler Kearns, went so far as to weave a “home-cooked folk song” throughout the text of their proposal. “We played a lot of Woody Guthrie and John Fahey in those days hoping for something to rub off” (Larry Kearns, quoted in OTSFM 1998). Elaine Moore remembers the decision in their favor as unanimous; just after the project’s completion, Jim Hirsch described their proposal as “very intriguing. They saw the building in ways that none of the other firms did, plus, they really seemed to speak our language, though as I recall, the folk song was pretty lame” (quoted in OTSFM 1998).
The committee had developed a very clear sense of what kind of atmosphere they were seeking in the new space. Jim Hirsch and Elaine Moore described very similar visions to me in separate interviews:

People were concerned they wanted it to be warm, they wanted it to be cozy, they wanted it to be welcoming. And not seeming modern—even though it was going to be all new. Having places for displays of all our old junk—which actually I think we could do better—just the décor. A little bit. The Old Town School down at Armitage always had a lot of junk hanging on the walls—insruments and paintings and all this crap. (Moore interview 2005a)

Here’s what I told Larry Kearns. I said, “Larry, what I want to have happen is when people cross the threshold, they leave reality and they enter Folk World.” I wanted the environment to be unbelievably distinct. Where there were tons of visual cues. Even the signs that determine what room you’re in, that are made out of instrument parts? Isn’t that right?2 […] That there would be things hanging on the walls that would have history oozing from them. That the feel would be consistent with the feel of the School. […] That it had this very distinct sense of place about it. That you literally felt that you were leaving one thing and entering into something else. And I think they succeeded by and large. (Hirsch interview 2005)

Both seem to be describing a visual, spatial representation of the Old Town School concept of “folk”: a pastiche of musical things, presumably diverse enough to attract the eyes of a variety of people (or so I interpret Elaine’s “all this crap”); its actual modernity disguised by references to the past, while at the same time appearing up-to-date enough for students to feel they would be treated competently and professionally; and a place apart, demarcated not only aurally but visually as a “third place.” In execution, these elements were mostly realized. The interior walls were painted a peculiar, brownish olive green, with contrast colors (for trim, furnishings, etc.) of dark green, brown and oxblood red – colors that were not unfashionable at the time, but by their near-tingliness suggested anything but newness. Blackboards in the entry hall listed upcoming concerts, workshops and other events, in whimsical lettering written with

2 I have not seen these signs, so they must have been removed by 2001.
colored chalk, reinforcing the sense of a personal touch. The Different Strummer Music Store’s display windows—those facing the street and those facing inward, to the hallway—exhibited a variety of instruments for sale, often including more unconventional specimens, such as a Hawaiian hand-painted guitar. At different times, portraits—painted and photographic—of Win Stracke, Studs Terkel, Frank Hamilton, Big Bill Broonzy, and other faces from OTSFM’s past have adorned the hallways and stairwells; quotes from Ted Johnson and Hamilton describing the School’s inception have hung near the Resource Center, referencing the School’s own roots and age. More recent history is reflected by the growing collection of OTSFM concert posters plastering the walls around the front desk staff. A gallery space showcasing local artists’ work keeps the School visually in tune with the current world.

After the disappointments of the Armitage remodel, members of the Old Town staff had worked much more closely with the architects. The basic components were to be similar to Armitage, but larger and better and distributed amongst three floors: classrooms and studios of various sizes, including a dance studio; a front desk area; a café; a music store; an administrative office suite; a resource center (evolving from museum to library); a multi-purpose room serving as classroom, art gallery, and meeting room; and several intimate gathering spaces. The floor plan is anchored by a centrally placed concert hall. “Probably the biggest single most important decision in terms of the final shape of the building was the placement of the concert hall. […] And then all the other spaces just laid out from there” (Hirsch interview 2005). Hirsch credits project manager Ed Noonan for seeing that the concert hall needed to be in the center, occupying both stories of the semi-circular areas that had been the reading room and the children’s room, with the stage where the circulation desk had been.

The things that were important to us, and what we told the theatre designer […] was we wanted a certain seat count, we wanted it to be acoustically brilliant, we
wanted the atmosphere to be very conducive to the type of presentations that we
did in terms of the look and the feel—the fact that the mural is over the
proscenium is just brilliant, it’s just one of my favorite parts of that space,
because it just sort of sets that tone that this is a people’s place, rather than some
sterile concert hall or what-have you. (ibid.)

The concert hall seats 425 on tiered, curved, cushioned benches on the main floor and balcony,
and at tables, arranged cabaret style between the benches and the stage. The arrangement is
designed so that no one is further than 45 feet from the stage, even in the balcony (Young 1998).
This intimate arrangement actually bears a striking resemblance to the way Pete Seeger once
imagined “the best hoot” would be arranged, “with an audience of several hundred, jammed tight
into a small hall, and seated semicircularwise, so that they face each other democratically”
(Filene 2000, 199). Indeed the hall has proven very conducive to audience participation, either
in song (as in most concerts) or on guitar (as in the nightly Second Half [see Chapter 7]), though
when the tables are removed for dancing, it has the opposite effect. “It’s good for
exhibitionists,” quipped Colleen Miller, Director of Concerts and Events, but she found that
“sometimes a big open dance floor is the worst thing” (Miller interview 2005a).

Acoustically, the concert hall has been universally regarded as a success. “I think it’s the
best performing space that I’ve ever been in. Period. I can’t think of a place I would rather
consume live music than there [. . .] I mean, who wouldn’t? You’ve just got it all. Nice lights,
unbelievable sound system, audience right on top of you” (Hirsch interview 2005a). Miller has
found that visiting performers typically are “very impressed” by the building and the “little gem”
of a concert hall (Miller interview 2005a).

The room was designed to serve a variety of functions. In addition to the Old Town
School’s weekend concert series—expanded, due to the new space—the concert hall also needed
to seat fifty to one hundred students and their guitars (or sometimes other instruments), with a
half-dozen teachers up front leading the group in a few songs every weeknight for Second Half. Other events have been held there as well, including lectures, meetings, film screenings, parties, and a handful of weddings.

As a rehabilitation of a historic building, the project was praised as well. “Adapting old structures to new uses is fraught with aesthetic risk […] The building is saved, but its spirit is destroyed. Fortunately, that didn’t happen here. Indeed, it seems as if the Folk Center was meant to be in the old library” (Kamin 1998). The Art Deco façade was left completely intact, though the new, flashing electric reader sign scrolling “Old Town School of Folk Music” is a jarring aberration to the overall aesthetic; apparently, it was a donation.

Rather than provide a central gathering space like the old building, the redesigned Hild instead offers pockets of space for socializing, musically or otherwise: benches and a couple of café tables in the first floor hallway, a basement lounge, clustered seating in the second-floor hallway, and a small, outdoor courtyard)—musicians also improvise spaces on landings and in corners (see, for example, the Pickin’ Bubs in Chapter 8), and conversations and tune-sharing moments happen here and there, where there is a chair or a bench. The front desk, oddly, does not welcome visitors as they come in; newcomers have to be directed 180 degrees around to the left to purchase tickets, register for classes, and ask questions. Between the front desk and the concert hall entrance is the café counter, offering a small selection of multi-ethnic deli-style salads and sandwiches and a wide array of beverages. Separated from the rest of the building by formidable double doors, the administrative suite occupies much of the second floor, a small warren of cubicles (decorated by their occupants) with three private offices for the highest-ranking staff. The Resource Center is in the basement, originally occupying a very small room directly underneath the stage, now significantly expanded; the only remnant of its original
museum mission was a large glass case housing some of the historical banjo collection, which has now been removed. The rest of the building is taken up by classrooms and private studios of many shapes and sizes, insulated sufficiently for the sounds of stringed instruments and singing, but unequal to the task, it turned out, of muffling djembe drums or flamenco heels.

The level of professionalism the new building—and especially the concert hall—evoked, inspired, and facilitated seemed a world away from the Armitage building. Speaking of the old concert hall, Elaine Moore explained,

> While people have fond memories of that little space in Armitage, half the time I was afraid to be in there. I mean, it was just packed with people. Like, are any of these exits open? I get claustrophobic. Either you’re boiling hot or freezing cold. I know a lot of people miss that really intimate concert setting, but I love this concert hall. I think it’s fabulous. I’m very proud that I work at a place with such a nice concert hall. (Moore interview 2005a)

In short, the building effectively reflected in architecture the balance OTSF was attempting to maintain between corporate efficiency and mellow, spontaneous participatory music making, if somewhat neglectful of dancing and drumming requirements.

Nowhere is the Old Town School’s role as a driver of gentrification clearer than in the development of Lincoln Square between 1997 and 2005. Lincoln Square is a small neighborhood centered, as one might expect, on a small brick square named after Abraham Lincoln, located at the intersection of Lincoln Avenue, Western Avenue and Lawrence Avenue. According to official city designation, the neighborhood is bounded on the east by Ravenswood Avenue and the Union Pacific/North Line of Metra commuter rail, on the west by the North Branch of the Chicago River, on the south by Montrose Avenue, and on the north by Bryn Mawr Avenue, interrupted by a large wedge of the Rosehill Cemetery. Colloquially, however, that larger area is often referred to as Ravenswood, with Lincoln Square a small, square-shaped area in its center, straddling Western Avenue.
The first European settlers in this area seven miles north of downtown Chicago were farmers, mostly German, on scattered truck farms serving the city in the mid-nineteenth century; the area became known for the mass production of flowers, pickles, and celery. Urban development was inspired by rail construction in two waves: the eastern half in the 1870s, with the opening of a railway stop just south of the Rosehill Cemetery, when the Ravenswood subdivision was built as a commuter suburb; and the western half after real estate speculators subsidized the extension of the elevated rail in 1907, causing a boom in residential development. The neighborhood’s architecture reflects that history, dominated by modest brick two- and three-flats and large, brick courtyard apartments on both sides of Western, but interspersed with some wooden single-family homes to the east.

While Lincoln Square has retained a German presence into the twenty-first century (my own downstairs landlords were a sweet, elderly, German-born couple), the larger neighborhood has hosted wave after wave of immigrants from many parts of the world. The Greeks were predominant in the mid-twentieth century, but many returned to Greece in the 1970s and 1980s. Mexicans and Central Americans have moved in over the last thirty years or so, and since the end of the Cold War, a significant Bosnian and Serbian population has taken root. Meanwhile, a small but vibrant Southeast Asian community is also represented; the innovative Cambodian American Heritage Museum is located on Lawrence near the river. Just west of the neighborhood, across the river, there is a vital corridor of Middle Eastern businesses, beyond which Koreatown starts and extends for several blocks. In terms of race, Lincoln Square is historically white—in 1960, an uncompromising 99.4% white—but diversity has steadily increased, making it only two-thirds white by 2000, still significantly whiter than most of the rest of the city. African Americans have always been a very small percentage of the population,
reaching an all-time high of 3.3% in 2000, while Asian and Hispanic populations apparently
grew between 1960 and 1990 (though they were not counted in 1960), holding steady at about
13% and 25% respectively during the 1990s. I have not located statistics for Native American
residents, but the American Indian Center of Chicago is located about a mile east of OTSFM on
Wilson, suggesting a population of significance in the area. Thus, ethnic diversity has always
been a more significant factor in the neighborhood than racial diversity, but with its Asians,
Native Americans, and Hispanics (who presumably identify with various races) and its
extraordinarily low African American population, its racial profile is rather unusual for Chicago.

Local merchants began promoting Lincoln Square as a shopping area in the late 1940s,
and one block of Lincoln Avenue south of Lawrence was converted to a pedestrian mall in the
1970s, styled with an old-world German aesthetic; the Brauhaus restaurant, “the last bastion of
German food and live entertainment,” with its half-timber, Bavarian-style façade, still anchors it,
along with the venerable Merz Apothecary. By the 1990s, however, the neighborhood had
decayed significantly. The population was declining (44,891 in 1990 and 44,574 in 2000, down
from a high of 49,850 in 1960) and crime was rising. Although the Sulzer Regional Library
noted an increase in surrounding property values immediately after it opened in 1985, implying it
had influenced them (CPL 1999), and the Lincoln Square retained its reputation as a stable,
family neighborhood, it was not considered attractive or desirable for many years. Sulzer’s 1993
annual report included a litany of worries, complaining of increased vandalism, “roving gangs of
youth,” the library staff’s fear of attack, and seriously neglected maintenance of the facility (CPL
1993). At the same time, speaking of the larger North Side area for which it was responsible, it
noted “an increase in young professionals [sic] moving into the community, property values
increase, family visits to the library on the rise, [and] waiting lists for children’s storytime and special programs” (ibid.).

As discussed in Chapter 5, there was general concern at OTSFM that students would not follow the School all the way to Lincoln Square (worries they were able to assuage with a thorough audience study). It was more than simply the distance that was off-putting to students, however. Bill Brickey, one of the few African Americans living in the neighborhood at the time, recalls students fretting about Lincoln Square’s safety.

Lincoln and Wilson? The students came to us, and they went, “Oh, that’s too far north. I don’t know if I could go to that neighborhood. I don’t know if I’d want to—?” I said, “Why wouldn’t you want to go there? It’s nice up there.” Because I lived at Lawrence and Wolcott, and I was in the neighborhood all the time, there’s no problems with the neighborhood. And they were like, “Well, I don’t know if I’m gonna be up there at night.” And it was like, “Night? What’s wrong with the neighborhood at night? I’m up in the neighborhood at night all the time, you know?” So it looked like it was not going to be good, because the neighborhood was too bad and the parking lot was this old, run-down building that had been knocked down, and it really did look kind of grungy, in retrospect. Now that I’ve been here longer, I can say, you know, there was some—it was relatively tough-looking. (Brickey interview 2005a)

By 1997, the Sulzer Library’s annual report was more positive, having completed its “busiest year ever,” noting in particular the growing diversity of its patrons.

Changes in neighborhoods are often reflected in library usage. Sulzer has seen an increase in the immigrant population, whether it be Spanish speaking or Serbo-Croatian. [....] As a regional library, we are also serving immigrant groups from all over the northside. Because of this we have seen an ever increasing number of Polish, Russian/Jewish, and East Indian new comers, while the Asian population continues to grow steadily on the northside. The proliferation of Thai restaurants, Arab cuisine, and ethnic grocery stores are not just a reflection of an increasingly sophisticated and adventuresome middle class, but the evidence of a new life to many non-English speaking people. In addition, we are witnessing frenetic [sic] rehabbing of old houses and apartment buildings, driving the cost of housing through the roof. Even homes which have not been touched for years are commanding high prices for well-heeled individuals and families, as well as investors. (CPL 1997)
The next year’s report noted corporate influences and upscaling tastes to be influencing the character of the neighborhood, following a wave of gentrification.

In an area which prides itself on its stability, Lincoln Square/Ravenswood/Northcenter, as well as much of the northside, is being turned on its head. Large banks are swallowing small community banks, their names no longer reflect the community. Cafes, restaurants, and even antique shops grace Lincoln Avenue in greater numbers. The proximity to transportation, good housing stock, a regional library, private and public schools […] draw urban professionals, young families, and the newest refugees from Bosnia. Wrought iron fences appear around schools and parks literally overnight. (CPL 1998)

It also made a special point of mentioning the opening of the Old Town School of Folk Music, which it described as “the biggest thing to hit the neighborhood since the opening of Sulzer in 1985” (ibid.). More of the same was reported for 1999, noting in particular the arrival of a Starbucks coffeehouse at Lincoln and Wilson just across from the Old Town School in a community “which has long supported local businesses, and with already well established local coffeehouses, a major chain is perceived as a threat.” This community mounted a “Save the Davis Theater” campaign in defense of a beloved local business, the old cinema a block north of the Old Town School, when it was threatened with plans for a condo conversion (CPL 1999); it remains an independently owned movie theater in 2011.

This neighborhood development was not accidental, but was welcomed and planned for by the local government. Jim Hirsch remembers being unsure of the neighborhood when they first started considering the Hild Building.

I was pretty unimpressed with the neighborhood, because that block on Lincoln Avenue, before Old Town got there, it was like…icky. There wasn’t a lot going on, some crappy bars, other pretty unimpressive businesses around there. Then I met with the alderman, Gene Schulter, who was instrumental in making that move happen. (Hirsch interview 2005)

Schulter was presumably able to help lobby the City for the generous support OTSFM ended up receiving for the move. “I bet you they paid that two million back in five years, easy, just on the
incremental taxes. Again, it’s just a textbook example of community development being driven by an arts organization. And Gene knows that” (ibid.) There is little question that Starbucks, for example, was attracted to that specific location because of its proximity to the Old Town School—there is a constant flow of caffeine seekers from the latter to the former (and in fact, more than enough local market remains to keep two other independent coffeehouses on the street packed as well). What the Sulzer report identified as “the cultural triangle of the library, Welles Park, and Old Town” was becoming a concentrated magnet to the neighborhood, seven days a week (1999). Alderman Schulter launched a Commercial Area Master Plan in 1997 to cover a 45-block area of Lincoln Square, to build infrastructure (like parking lots) to accommodate and encourage the new traffic to the neighborhood. Schulter was not the only politician to recognize the economic value of the Old Town School: “Rahm Emmanuel, our Congressman, said at last year’s Folk and Roots [Festival], ‘If anybody asks you what effect the Old Town School’s had on Lincoln Square, just bring ‘em out to Lincoln Avenue and look down the street. You don’t need any numbers, just show ‘em the place.’ Thanks! Can I quote you on that? ‘Sure!’ So people want numbers, I say, just listen to Rahm Emmanuel!” (Roche interview 2005a).

I first became familiar with Lincoln Square in early 2001, when I started going to the Old Town School as a volunteer and student. I remember my impression of that stretch Lincoln Avenue at the time was of a comfortable, unpretentious neighborhood with a lot of businesses you don’t really notice unless you specifically need them, like dentists, insurance agents, and veterinarians. I was a vegetarian at the time, and the choices in this German/Eastern European/Mexican-dominated area were limited; there were a couple of nice restaurants that were beyond my reach, and a couple of places to grab a sandwich; the Brauhaus and the German sausage-maker (which is still there) did not attract me. Over the years, the neighborhood
gradually became more attractive to me, with a couple of boutiques, a bead store, a used record store with a hipster aesthetic, a contemporary-style diner, an inexpensive Turkish restaurant, a trendy second-hand store, and the Bad Dog Tavern directly across from the School. By 2005, however, the businesses were becoming less friendly to my graduate-student income and in subsequent years began sailing well beyond it. This was particularly true along the pedestrian mall area just north of the School: the Chopping Block offers high-end cookware and pricey cooking classes; the Book Cellar devotes only half of its space to books, with the rest a coffee shop/wine bar where well-heeled moms chat, rocking infants in SUV-sized strollers; a handful of new boutiques sell independent designer clothes, handmade shoes, and an eclectic variety of impractical yet charming gift items; and a toy store specializes in educational, expensive, and often European toys. A number of businesses remain from decades past, however, including the aforementioned Brauhaus, Lincoln Quality Meat Market (friendly, no doubt to the artisan and locavore food trends), and Merz Apothecary (whose homeopathic remedies and European toiletries translate easily to the upscaling clientele), as well as Salamander Shoes (specializing in European brands), and the European Import Center (chocolates, cheeses, and other food products from central Europe).

These changes were not welcomed by some of the long-term residents of the area. “People are lamenting they can no longer live in the neighborhood that they grew up in,” the Sulzer reported noted (1999). Hirsch was well aware of the possible conflicts.

I met with a lot of community groups, prior to us moving in there, and tried to give them a sense of what we might do for the community. And some of the people were very excited and supportive, and then there were just some people that just kind of thought of us as like an invading horde of hippies or something and were very, very negative to our coming up there. But, you know, change is scary. (Hirsch interview 2005)
A glowering lament in the *Chicago Reader* in 1999 by writer Jack Clark (possibly a pseudonym) about the gentrification of Lincoln Square may have been representative of some of this resistance, at least that of the artist vanguard that tends to precede actual gentrification. “These people have been following me around for decades pushing me from one neighborhood to the next,” he complained. “And here they were again.” Clark waxed sentimental about the existing coffee shops—“None of them are of the Starbucks variety. Most are full of people speaking foreign languages, people with accents. It’s that kind of neighborhood. That’s one of its greatest charms”—and the No Big Deal Sports Bar—“A pool table, a jukebox, a couple of TVs […] In other words it was just a bar. A normal city bar. The problem is, the neighborhood is no longer a normal city neighborhood. It’s a hot spot” (Clark 1999). His essay was answered by two passionate letters defending the neighborhood changes, and specifically the Old Town School’s contribution. Ed Tverdek and N. Sawyer criticized him as a “self-styled bohemian,” that is, “expatriates of the comfortable classes who disavow their social privileges and who exoticize the ethnic groups and dispossessed of their newfound neighborhood,” while Michael J. Graff credited OTSFM with providing Clark’s “people with accents” with “the music and dances of their own home cultures” (Tverdek and Sawyer 1999; Graff 1999). Clearly, all four writers were somewhat idealistic in expressing their biases, yet not, I think, idiosyncratic, but rather represented certain sides of a city-wide debate over gentrification.

Clark and his ilk did have a point about the ethnic homogenization of Lincoln Square. While ethnic diversity in the broader area was actually increasing during this period, it was not obvious to visitors to the neighborhood who did not stray far from Lincoln Avenue between the pedestrian mall and the Sulzer Library. As David Roche pointed out, although Mexican Americans constituted the majority of students in local elementary students, “You don’t see
many Mexican Americans on the street here, do you? But you see them at La Peña [OTSFM’s Wednesday night Latino music showcase]. You see them on Lawrence. You see them when we have Los Tres Reyes” (Roche interview 2005a). Bosnian children were the second largest ethnic group in the schools, but there was little evidence of their presence on, either. Lincoln Avenue was (and is) oriented towards an affluent, mostly white professional clientele. A short walk to the west down Lawrence Avenue quickly reveals a kaleidoscope of ethnic and linguistic groups, however. In the mile or so between my apartment and the Old Town School along Lawrence were a Korean restaurant, a Greek bakery, several Mexican taco shops, a Costa Rican restaurant, a coffeeshop that seemed to cater exclusively to Balkan middle-aged men, a couple of Thai restaurants, and many other businesses, all catering more to patrons of their own ethnicity than to others. The local, independently owned general grocery, HarvesTime, offered inexpensive Mexican, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern products alongside mainstream American ones.

Lincoln Square soon began to attract people associated with the Old Town School like Arlo Leach, who began taking classes at OTSFM in 1998 soon after the move and began teaching in 2003.

TL: Did you move here [to this apartment] because of the School?

AL: Yeah, pretty much. The school gave me an opportunity to see the neighborhood—I may not have seen it otherwise, but it’s a perfect neighborhood. (Leach interview 2005)

If something else had given him reason to visit, perhaps he still would have been attracted to it, but his first impression of the neighborhood, and the feeling of excitement it gave him, was entirely generated by the Old Town School:

I’ll never forget the first night I came here for a class, got off the Brown Line, all the people got off the train, normally everybody’s carrying briefcases and stuff for work, but everyone poured off the train at western carrying violin cases and guitar and trumpet cases. Everyone got off the train and funneled down the sidewalk and
towards the Old Town School. It felt like from every direction all these people with instruments were coming and going to this one place and you walked in the place and all the collective energy from all these people was just right there, and it’s just pretty amazing that something like that can exist. (*ibid.*)

Polly Parnell also chose to live in Lincoln Square because of her attachment to the Old Town School. She had only moved to Chicago about three years before our interview, from rural Pennsylvania, and immediately began taking classes at OTSFM. “I just met my circle of friends there, and it just happened that it’s my social life [….W]hen I was looking for an apartment of my own, I definitely looked right in this neighborhood, and that was a conscious decision of mine, to stay close to the Old Town School and of course I found the perfect place, very close” (Parnell interview 2005). In a stroke of luck, she also got a job as an accountant at a plumbing company in the neighborhood, within walking distance.

I have a really great boss, very supportive of Old Town School, I think that’s what got me my job is when I told him I was involved in Old Town School, ‘cause he’s an Irish guy and he likes Irish singing. He just likes the whole idea of Old Town School kind of reviving his neighborhood, he thinks it did a lot. He’s all for the neighborhood. (*ibid.*)

Judy Davis had lived in the North Side neighborhood of Wrigleyville, near Wrigley Stadium, for more than twenty-five years when I met her. But the day I interviewed her, she had just signed the papers on a condo in Lincoln Square. Her four years playing with the Beatles Ensemble and taking guitar and cello classes at the Old Town School had brought her to the neighborhood, and she realized that the only road she ever drove on was Lincoln Avenue (owning a car was a new phase of life for her, necessitated by the inconvenience of carrying guitar and cello cases on the El), and that all her favorite hangouts were near the School. Wrigleyville had already lost its edge for her; she had moved there at nineteen for the exciting nightlife, but it had gentrified and now even her favorite businesses were moving out—to Lincoln Square. “And I’m driving—oh! There’s Old Town—oh! There’s one of my favorite
places—oh! There’s one of my favorite places—and [my friend] said, ‘why don’t you move here?’ [TL laughs] And I said, ‘here? I never thought about moving here.’ But it’s so funny because it was like this giant lightbulb, you know, this revelation—‘what a genius you are!’”

(Davis interview 2005)

Twelve years after the Old Town School’s expansion into Lincoln Square, the neighborhood remains hospitable and spacious enough (though parking scarcity is an ongoing issue). Steady enrollment growth in the new century has put the School in a position to expand yet again. In 2006, OTSFM purchased an empty building across the street, a former commercial bakery, and razed it. The new facility is to provide more appropriate space for dance and drumming classes, limited in the two existing buildings by insufficient sound insulation. In addition to more teaching space, the plans include more social gathering areas, another café, and a small auditorium. Ground was broken in August 2010 and the building is scheduled to open in the fall of 2011.

*Other Branches.* Old Town, central Lincoln Park, and Lincoln Square have hosted the Old Town School’s three main locations. But the School has also supported a variety of small branch locations at different times. None of these has lasted more than a few years or welcomed more than a few hundred students at a time, sometimes much less, but they represent an ongoing interest of the Old Town School’s to offer its services more conveniently to Chicagoans in other areas. Suburban branches operated in Skokie, Evanston and Wilmette in the 1970s; Jim Hirsch first began teaching at the Skokie branch and later took charge of it after it moved to the Noyes Cultural Center in Evanston. A branch was opened in the largely Mexican neighborhood of Pilsen for a couple of years in the 1990s in an attempt to make the Wiggleworms infant and toddler classes more accessible to Latino Chicago, but it didn’t “stick.” “That was one of our sort
of our failed projects. The community for some reason did not embrace it or support it” (Dies interview 2005). In the 2000s, the School began offering some classes out of the South Shore Cultural Center, in a predominantly African American, middle class neighborhood on the South Side, in another effort to improve diversity, though these seem to have ended. The School is now running a small storefront studio in the Lakeview neighborhood and Wiggleworms-only programs in a few suburbs.

Conclusion

The neighborhood history of the Old Town School illustrates how this institution has been an agent, victim, and beneficiary of urban gentrification processes. Originally part of the bohemian vanguard that typically transforms a working-class neighborhood into a desirable habitat for the affluent (agent), and consequently pushed out by the rising prices (victim), the Old Town School has, since moving into the Hild Building, evolved into the heart of such a habitat (catalyst and beneficiary). It is a case study of how certain types of “cultural” institutions, offering entertainment and self-enrichment opportunities to the upwardly mobile “creative class,” become key contributors to a local economy, bringing in audiences and new residents and therefore income to other local businesses, not to mention tax revenues. These institutions do not merely attract affluent consumers to a locale, like a billboard or the smell of warm cookies, but in, the case of one as large and influential as OTSFM, constitute what that locale becomes.

Lincoln Square has thus become a musical neighborhood since the Old Town School’s arrival. In addition to the guitars and strollers populating Lincoln Avenue’s sidewalks on weekdays, crowds of concert goers—age, dress and ethnicity varying according to the genre of music—stream through and flood the restaurants on weekend evenings. On a pleasant summer
day, walking through the residential streets west of Western Avenue, I remember passing several two-flats where one or two people were lounging on the porch or balcony strumming a guitar. As this vibrant atmosphere raises the neighborhood’s profile and draws a trendier set of visitors and a fine dining scene, Lincoln Square will become—is already becoming—less economically welcoming to the musicians who populate its heart. The Old Town School will clearly not be moving this time, however; it now has the institutional stability, capacity and reputation to draw support from the affluent newcomers as easily as from cash-strapped bohemians—and furthermore, these new supporters are not any less likely to participate in the School’s musical offerings than the older ones, though they may do so with different expectations, of themselves and of the institution. In a sense, the Old Town School’s clientele and staff occupy different places on the economic spectrum of the same “creative class.” This examination of gentrification and the Old Town School provides an illuminating case study that contributes to the understanding of social class as a dimension of music-making in contemporary urban America.

In my interviews with Old Town School teachers, students and staff, past and present, I nearly always asked, “Why Chicago?” What is it that makes this city so supportive of such unique folk music institutions? Those who had grown up in Chicago seldom had an answer. David Roche, who moved to Chicago in 2000 from California’s Bay Area in order to become executive director of the Old Town School, was amazed by the level of civic support of the arts he found in his new home, compared with the West Coast, but he was also unimpressed by the natural surroundings. On more than one occasion, he shared with me with his theory that it is precisely because Chicago is so lacking in any extra-urban distractions in the form of natural
beauty or wilderness, that its people must invest in themselves and in each other—in the
organizations, arts and otherwise, that make Chicago a rich and rewarding place to live.

Small interest groups pursuing music and dance in ways indebted to the folk revival exist
today in all regions of the United States, in communities of all sizes. Chicago’s contribution to
this musical movement was a social and economic environment that actively encouraged
grassroots participation, fed with all the advantages of a world-class metropolis. It may have
been merely an accident of history that Chicago never became an entertainment industry center,
making space for working musicians to, if not always thrive, certainly survive, with the aid of
steady paychecks from organizations like the Old Town School. The resulting environment was
amenable to sustaining stable, long-lasting institutions, like the University of Chicago Folk
Festival and OTSFM, in which amateur, participatory music making could practically be
pursued, adapting to the needs and interests of new generations.
CHAPTER 3
ORIGIN STORIES: ROADS TO THE OLD TOWN SCHOOL, 1930-1957

On the evening of November 29, 1957, a Friday, a steady stream of people was arriving at the old Immigrant Bank building at 333 W. North Avenue. The neighborhood and the building had seen better days, but the second floor was warmly lit, and voices, laughter, and loud footsteps on the rickety wooden stairs could be heard. Men and women, well-dressed and not so well-dressed—and, notably, both white and black—climbed to the second floor, walked down a long corridor and into a large room with a low platform at one end, signed in, and took a seat on folding chairs. Many seemed to know each other well, greeting each other fondly, excited but uncertain about what would happen. “Media folk, mid-1950s Chicago literati and cognoscenti, plus a colorful cross-section of the emerging Midwest folk scene, then groupies, hootenanny veterans, Gate of Horn hangers-on, the assorted Chi-town and Forty-Third Ward characters that Win knows—everybody from Studs Terkel to Paddy Bauler” were there, remembered Ted Johnson, who was there himself (Grayson 1991, 9).

The wheeze and blare of George Armstrong’s bagpipes, in what would become an indispensable tradition, officially started off the evening. Win Stracke, or “Uncle Win” as Chicago knew him from his television and radio programs for children, welcomed the assembled to the opening night of the Old Town Folk Music School, the first of its kind. In what he later called “a burst of overconfidence,” Stracke introduced it as “the first permanent school of folk music in the United States” (Stracke 1967). Very nearly a roll call list of people who would later be or already were active and important in the Chicago folk music scene and the Old Town School in particular were there: Studs Terkel, George and Gerry Armstrong, Ted Johnson, John
Carbo, Fleming Brown, Ella Jenkins, Velucha DeCastro, Shirley Pinkus, and Evelyn Brightman signing people in at the door (Hamilton interview 2005).

And of course the School’s founders were there. Win Stracke, who had the idea, the capital, and the space; Frank Hamilton, the energetic young musician from the West Coast who supplied the group teaching method; and Gertrude Soltker, a veteran of labor theatre of the 1930s and 1940s and an experienced administrator, who organized the finances and logistics and got the paperwork done. “The witty rascible Soltker could coax donations from Scrooge himself” (Rank 1983), but she would eventually to be overshadowed in the collective memory of the Old Town School community by Dawn Greening, then an enthusiastic housewife and social organizer for the hootenanny crowd, who was there with her family and possibly serving coffee cake, or perhaps champagne, with a big smile (Grayson 1991, 9). And fighting the late stages of cancer, Big Bill Broonzy was there, too, to be immortalized in memory after his imminent death.

In Stracke’s account on the occasion of the Old Town School’s tenth anniversary:

> Several hundred prospective students attended along with a fine representation of performers, leaders in the field of adult education, and Old Town notables. George Armstrong opened the proceedings with the rending strains of the bagpipes; Frank Hamilton gave a demonstration of his teaching method using our former Oak Park group as guinea pigs; Big Bill Broonzy performed on of his blues and, on the spot, Frank reproduced Bill’s intricate right hand style in written tablature on a blackboard and then proceeded to play the guitar in a fairly exact rendition of Bill’s playing; we instituted our coffee break which has continued to a be a part of every Old Town School of Folk Music class; we closed the evening with a songfest, and the school was on its way. (Stracke 1967, 2-3)

In this chapter I will trace what might be called “the prehistory” of the Old Town School by recounting the life stories—or pathways, following Ruth Finnegan—of its key founders and of the people who crossed their paths along their way. These stories will demonstrate the interconnectedness of folk revival communities across the United States, and how well integrated into these networks the Old Town School founders were. The narratives that build this chapter
come from interviews I conducted in 2005 and 2006, written accounts by the protagonists, the occasional mention in a secondary source, and interviews conducted by others. In all cases, they were told as memories, years after the fact, and the stories inevitably became more rehearsed the later they were told. While I feel confident that my interviews with Frank Hamilton and Ted Johnson were thorough and truthful, I’m under no illusions that I was eliciting new material, but rather was recording fresh retellings—hopefully with a handful of new insights added—of old, familiar stories.

In fact, almost from its inception, the Old Town School community has tended towards moments of recollection and self-commemoration, telling, creating in the telling and rehearsing its own story to itself, imagining the School from the beginning as a permanent institution with a history to be made. Although it is probably impossible to pinpoint exactly when the habitual practice of recollecting began in the School’s “oral tradition” (that is, in casual conversation, in the course of teaching and during communal moments like the Second Half), the first iteration on record of the Old Town School’s “origin story” was written up by George Armstrong on the occasion of the first issue of the School’s first newsletter in 1960. The version more people will have read, however, is Win Stracke’s own account, printed up in a ten-page pamphlet for the School’s tenth anniversary and titled “Biography of a Hunch” (referring to his prediction that Chicago needed and would support a folk music school); this has been posted to the OTSFM website for several years now. In-house newsletters of later decades regularly published interviews with long-standing denizens of the Old Town School. Commemorative events, such as Old Town School anniversaries and memorials, began at least as early as 1982, on the occasion of the School’s twenty-fifth anniversary, and have occurred regularly ever since; these have usually been centered on the singing of old favorites, framed with memories, anecdotes,
and a general reinforcement of the Old Town School narratives. Most recently, the Old Town School hosted a “Wincentennial” on February 16, 2008, in honor of the centennial of Win Stracke’s birth, which I attended; a few details here are drawn from reminiscences at that event. These texts and performances constitute an ongoing collective memory project, the Old Town School’s narrative construction of who they are and who they came from.

Certain key figures inevitably feature prominently in these narratives—in particular Stracke and Hamilton—and because I feel that these individuals did indeed make distinctive and important contributions to the conception and development of the School, they do here as well. Frank Hamilton insisted, however, that the point must be made “over and over and over again” that the School was, ultimately and fundamentally, a collective enterprise.

The School was created by many different people. No one person can take credit for the School. That’s really important. If it wasn’t for Ted Johnson, or Valucha, or Ginny Clemmons, Johnny Carbo, the Greening family, George and Gerry Armstrong, Fleming Brown, Nate Lofton, Evelyn Brightman, Gertrude Soltker our first bookkeeper, the support from the folk performers across the country actually at that time, and the students, there would be no Old Town School of Folk Music. Any one person who emerges as being a titular head, or…this is not true. [pause] It’s not true. The School was created by everybody who wanted to be a part of it. (Hamilton interview 2006)

The stories in this chapter follow the outline of the familiar narrative, but are elaborated by my own research, contextualizing some of the events within regional and national history, in particular that of the folk revivals of the time, and corroborating facts where possible with archival research, information gleaned from the contemporary press, and other scholarly research on related topics.
Win Stracke (1908-1991) is unanimously credited with coming up with the idea of starting a folk music school for Chicago. In true Chicago tradition, his inspiration was based in a healthy mixture of idealistic and pragmatic motivations. Three months after the opening of the School, a short story in the *Chicago Daily News* described “the dean of Chicago’s newest and strangest educational institution” as “a burly, balding fellow with a resounding bass voice who looks more like a genial teamster than a teacher.” The reader was of course reminded that Stracke was “the former ‘Uncle Win’ of a kiddies television show,” and, the author naïvely imagines, “probably the only educator in the world who has a repertoire of more than 1,000 ‘authentic’ folk tunes” (Henahan 1958). These quotes zero in on certain class tensions, even contradictions, that ran through Win Stracke’s life and person, musical and otherwise.

Winfred J. Stracke was born in February 20, 1908, in Lorainne, Kansas, the son of German immigrants Robert and Anna, and the youngest of seven children. The family moved to Chicago in 1910, however, so despite these small-town roots, Win himself was always an urbanite. Although they settled first in the neighborhood of Old Town, for most of his childhood the Stracke family lived in the North Side neighborhood of Andersonville (not far from the current location of the Old Town School in Lincoln Square), a neighborhood dominated by Scandanavian immigrants (Carl Sandburg lived nearby, though there is no indication that the Strackes knew him). Win’s father Robert, who died when Win was ten, was a Baptist minister, pastor of the Second German Baptist Church in the Old Town neighborhood of Chicago.

It was while attending Senn High School in Chicago’s Edgewater neighborhood that Win discovered he had a beautiful bass/baritone voice and a talent for music. He performed first in the school choir and then in professional productions, at some point receiving some classical
training. “He was very shy up to that point, a shy boy. He began to sing and he realized he had a voice! And he could impress people! It really made a difference, and he said that really changed his life, to find that he had something like that,” his daughter Jane recounted (Bradbury, 2008). His older brother Al was also a singer and pursued a vaudeville career.

Throughout his life, Win’s respectable middle-class origins were apparent: raised as a minister’s son and trained as a classical singer. From 1929 to 1932, he studied at Lake Forest College, a private, liberal arts college situated in the well-to-do suburbs north of Chicago (Stracke 1968-1972). At the same time, however, he was always attracted to a rougher-edged life and felt a strong affinity for working class people and concerns. As early as 1926, just out of high school, Stracke set out from Chicago in a Model-T Ford to see the country and ended up working as a roustabout on an oil well in Thermopolis, Wyoming, as well as a piano accompanist in a brothel. A man called Flat Wheel Harry, a fellow laborer, left a deep impression on Stracke, as “the first person who really gave me the feeling of the oral tradition of American folklore. After working at the well, he’d tell amusing stories about Babe the Blue Ox, and he taught me to sing ‘The Big Rock Candy Mountain’” (Grayson 1991, 2). He worked his way back to Chicago from the West Coast on a merchant freighter with a Puerto Rican crew—perhaps developing cultural sensitivities that would be useful later in a Puerto Rican neighborhood. His journey echoed the romantically inspired hoboing of such figures as Carl Sandburg, Jack London, Eugene O’Neil, and John Steinbeck, who had all gone looking for America.

Back in Chicago, Win began studying voice formally and launched a professional career. He even married a classical singer in the early 1930s, Agatha Lewis, with whom he sang as a duo. Whatever personal tensions there may have been in their marriage, the fact that after they divorced Win remarried factory worker and organizer Genevieve McMahon in 1942 suggests
that class—and associated tastes—likely remained a tension in his life. Their first child, Barbara Ellen, was born while he was overseas serving in World War II and their second, Jane Elizabeth, was born after the war.

Stracke never retreated entirely from middle-class “respectability,” singing at churches throughout his life, in choirs and as a classical soloist. He sang as a soloist at the Fourth Presbyterian Church from 1933 to 1940, for example. In his own words, “The parishioners were very well-to-do people, whose families had come from New England to Chicago many years ago. I was just beginning to wake up to the fact that there was such a thing as politics and influences in our society” (Terkel 1970, 195). Win was also a regular on radio programs like *Hymns of All Churches* and performed concerts, often featuring the German lieder he was especially known for throughout his life.

Stracke began his theatrical career as a teenager singing in the chorus of Max Reinhardt’s *The Miracle* at the Auditorium Theater in 1926, on tour from Broadway with its extravagant sets and cast of 600 (pamphlet, 1926). Within a few years, he soon became active in smaller-scale labor and activist theatre, though I have not found documentation of precisely how he made the initial connection. As a young man with an open mind, attracted to both the life of the stage and progressive politics, this would have been an inevitable draw in 1930s Chicago. Stracke became involved with the labor-oriented Chicago Repertory Group (CRG) around 1938, meeting many of his closest friends through it, including Louis “Studs” Terkel; Terkel was to become a lifelong friend and, after Stracke’s death, defender of his memory. Also through the CRG, Stracke met actress and later arts administrator Gertrude Soltker, one of the three official founders of the Old Town School.
In the 1930s, Win was further embracing his interest in rural music and began singing bass on WLS’s National Barn Dance in 1931, an intermittent gig for many years, though his daughter believes he only ever sang in trios and other vocal ensembles, never as a solo act (Bradbury 2008). It is probably not insignificant that this particular part of his career is often highlighted in retellings of Stracke’s life at the Old Town School.

Like many of his leftwing compatriots (including Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, and many others), Win Stracke served in World War II. His nephew Bob Stracke recalled at Win’s memorial that although he received very high scores on the army’s intelligence tests, he was only comfortable as an enlisted man (OTSFM 1991). He was in an anti-aircraft battery, serving in England, North Africa, Sicily and France, and managed to avoid seeing much action. Like many GIs, his war experience opened his eyes to the world outside America, and in Win’s case, gave him the opportunity to encounter new people through music (Bradbury 2008). According to his daughter, “he had a pretty good war,” and took advantage of the opportunity to sightsee, meeting shepherd boys in North Africa and visiting cathedrals in Sicily. In Aix-en-Provence, he became involved with the local community and performed in a Christmas play, a joint production with the US military (ibid. and OTSFM 2008). This international experience, shared by millions of other U.S. soldiers, contributed to a postwar surge of internationalism, and quite likely to the internationalist intent of the early Old Town School.

After the war, Stracke started the Chicago chapter of People’s Songs. His local stature was immediately recognized by the New York organizers. “It was a lucky thing then,” Felix Landau wrote in an issue of the People’s Songs Bulletin, “that we came on Win Stracke, a man with a big fine bass, who sings all over the Chicago radio” (Landau 1946). Stracke was soon officially elected to the national People’s Songs Board, alongside B.A. Botkin, Tom Glazer,
Woody Guthrie, Bess Lomax Hawes, Lee Hays, Earl Robinson, Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, and several others. Henry Wallace’s 1948 bid for U.S. president on the Progressive Party ticket rocketed People’s Songs into the national spotlight, as they provided the soundtrack to his campaign (Cohen 2002, 57). After Wallace lost badly, however, People’s Songs’ fortunes flagged; it was reconfigured as a booking agency for progressive musicians, renamed “People’s Artists.” Win Stracke may have continued to be involved with the organization, though I have found no evidence of it, and he certainly stayed in touch with his People’s Songs colleagues for years to come, as evidenced by the parade of former members that were to perform at the Old Town School later on.

The post-war years brought more than the defeat of pre-war political goals; it also brought television. And for Win Stracke this was a new career opportunity. One of his first television jobs was acting on an early soap opera called “Hawkins Falls,” in which he played a handyman named Laif Flagler, a happy-go-lucky town character (Bradbury 2008). He was let go after about a year, however, the first of several moves to blacklist him for his political activities.

More relevant to the story of the Old Town School, starting around 1950, Stracke became a central character in Studs Terkel’s quasi-improvisatory ensemble show, “Studs’ Place.” In Terkel’s own words,

“Studs’ Place” was a neighborhood restaurant, an arena in which dreams and realities of ‘ordinary people’ were acted out. Four of us, Beverly Younger, Win Stracke, Chet Roble, and I—playing pretty much ourselves—called upon our memories, experiences and felt lives. It was a strange program that paradoxically was familiar to the audience; so familiar that a great many believed there was such a place. It was, of course, El Dorado. (Terkel 1995, 45)

“Studs’ Place” was, though quirky, not alone, in fact representing a brief phenomenon in broadcast media dubbed the “Chicago School of Television.” In contrast to the theater-based approach in New York and the screenplay-based approach in Hollywood, early television studios
in Chicago—in particular the NBC station, WNBQ—experimented with “an almost scriptless-improvisational approach reliant on interpretive camera work and creative use of scenery, costumes, props and lighting”—an approach also friendly to small budgets, not incidentally (Sternberg 2004). Dozens of innovative shows were made in this manner in Chicago and broadcast nationally from 1949 into the early 1950s. By 1955, however, they had disappeared from the national airwaves; thenceforth, only local programs were produced in Chicago.

“Studs’ Place,” with its “casual, seemingly spontaneous air,” fit this paradigm to a tee (Terkel 1995, 45). The show’s small cast improvised dialogue in the setting of an everyday diner owned by Studs. Stracke often sang on the show, organically integrating it into the plot of the episode, usually in a folksy manner with his guitar befitting the working-class character he played, but on at least one occasion performed a German lied in full to the stunned amazement of the other characters (Terkel, n.d.). The show drew a passionate response from its audience. Terkel recalls: “From every stratum of society came fervent pieces of mail: a scrawled note in pencil on lined paper; a dowager’s embossed stationery; a contemplative letter from a professor in the humanities; an equally contemplative one from a truck-driver. NBC made the logical decision. It dropped the program” (Terkel 1995, 41). The tone of that last quote, while quintessentially Studs, also represents an insistent egalitarianism, mixed with self-deprecating humor, an assumed mistrust of the powerful, and a healthy irony that holds up in the Chicago folk music community surrounding the Old Town School to this day.

The cancelling of the show was another move to enforce a political blacklist in Chicago entertainment circles—this time against Terkel (according to him, network executives were open to Stracke, Younger and Roble continuing the show without him, but they refused [Terkel 1995, 45]). Stracke’s third strike came to his popular, prizewinning children’s program nationally
broadcast on NBC, “Animal Playtime,” which first aired in 1953. A half hour of Stracke singing and telling stories to Roger the Duck, Estes the Raccoon, Billy the Kid (a goat, of course) and assorted other real animals borrowed from a local pet store, the program was done in an improvisatory style similar to that of “Studs’ Place” (Bradbury 2008). There are apparently no extant tapes of the show, but Jane Stracke Bradbury, who watched the show just like other children, realizes in retrospect that it was “so unusual. Because the other shows had cartoons, and puppets and more cartoons, slapstick […] And my father…there was more respect for the audience. They were nice songs, they were gentle, and there was interest with the animals. Who could resist that?” (ibid.). It was from this point, if not before, that Stracke became well-known in Chicago as the children’s performer “Uncle Win.” “Animal Playtime,” despite its popularity, was abruptly cancelled from the national airwaves in 1954. A TV critic assured readers that it was for “a good reason,” and the “same one” for which Stracke was let go from “Hawkins Falls.” The reason was, of course, Stracke’s supposed political affiliations.

Studs Terkel is fond of claiming for himself and Stracke the title of the “Chicago Two.” (Terkel 2002, 2006). Apparently these old friends were, in fact, the only Chicago entertainers to be blacklisted during the McCarthy/HUAC period, a badge that Terkel wore with contrarian pride. Terkel was quoted in Rolling Stone recalling that he felt left out, even disappointed by not being more quickly identified with other suspected “fellow travelers” in Red Channels, a publication that “outed” such individuals: “People I love were in it—Arthur Miller, Zero Mostel, Lillian Hellman—but where was me? I felt like the blue-haired dowager who didn’t make the social register!” (quoted in Cott 2001, 50). But his history of supporting anti-Jim Crow and anti-poll-tax initiatives and attending “subversive” meetings (such as, no doubt, his involvement with the Chicago Repertory Group), probably shared with Stracke, eventually garnered them both the
honor. Jane Stracke Bradbury attests that her father was “very involved in politics” before the war, but she did not feel comfortable enough to specify on the record just how, even today (Bradbury 2008). Nonetheless, both were surprisingly sanguine about their persecution, Stracke at the time, and Terkel possibly then and definitely in retrospect. “I accepted it as a product of the times. I did not have strong feelings of anger, which I think I should have had,” Stracke recalled in an interview years later. Similarly philosophical, Terkel wrote, “Times being what they were in the early fifties, and business, after all, being business, what choice did NBC have? It was nothing personal” (Terkel 1995, 43). In response to popular demand, Stracke’s “Animal Playtime” did return to the airwaves—but only locally, on the Chicago ABC affiliate WBKB, and at one third his NBC pay.

Meanwhile, Stracke and Terkel pursued a variety of entertainment projects in the 1950s to keep themselves employed and creative. One particularly relevant to this story is the traveling series he had been doing with three friends since 1947, “I Come for To Sing,” a project that apparently continued throughout the 1950s. Studs Terkel and Win Stracke, joined by Laurence Lane and Big Bill Broonzy, put together an act with educational intent, where each would address a given theme, like “work” or “love,” with songs from different traditions representing different takes on the theme. Terkel recalls,

So Win would sing frontier American songs and Big Bill would sing black man’s blues and Larry Lane would sing Elizabethan songs, or Child ballads, and I was a sort of easy-going narrator. And it scored like a house afire at different colleges. And then we played at different nightclubs in Chicago, on nights when they were dark. (Terkel 2002)

The quartet toured college and university campuses, mostly in the Midwest but occasionally further afield. The quartet also had a regular, weeknight gig at the Blue Note nightclub. “I Come For to Sing” was one of the earliest folk music tours of college campus—Pete Seeger did not begin his campus tours until the early 1950s—heralding and perhaps inspiring the “Folk
Boom” to come. It was also in a clear line of descent from other folk music performance projects of the preceding period, marrying an eclectic selection of traditional music to some kind of narrative, like Guthrie’s “Grapes of Wrath” show, or John Hammond’s “Spirituals to Swing” series. It seems unlikely that “I Come For To Sing” was a significant source of income for Broonzy, Lane, Stracke and Terkel, though it doubtless provided some. By way of comparison, Joe Hickerson recalls scraping together $200 from other students (including a large chunk from his own savings) to bring Pete Seeger to the Oberlin College campus in 1955 (conversation with Hickerson, 2005).

Win Stracke was an accomplished and versatile musician, a master of his own voice. In 1968, he released a record album called Songs of Old Town. The album features mostly Chicago and Illinois songs, many if not all of which were familiar to and much loved by OTSFM students, such as “El-A-Noy,” a nineteenth-century propaganda ballad inviting settlers to Illinois, “Down by the Embarrass,” a lovely ode to the rivers of Illinois, and “The 43rd Ward” (see Chapter 2). Several are humorous, flirting with profanities, like “Wizard Oil,” the song of a traveling medicine show man (from Sandburg’s American Songbag), and “Harp of 1000 Strings,” a spoken sermon and parody of a hubristic, under-educated Baptist preacher, demonstrating how much of Stracke’s musicality was drawn from the cadences of church oration. The songs are mostly accompanied by Ray Tate on guitar and banjo, with occasional bass, percussion and piano on the more “citified” songs, like “The First Baseball Game,” which casts famous figures from the Bible in a baseball game. A few of the songs have specific German ethnic references, one is Scottish (“Wee Drappie O’t”) and at least one of the songs he sings is African American in origin (“Dink’s Song”). All of these songs would certainly have been considered “folksongs” by his audiences.
Stracke’s baritone voice as heard on this and other recordings is refined and expressive, with a wide range—far more trained and developed than most in the folk revival. The art music basis for that training is obvious in his voice’s even, resonant, bel canto quality; it is easy to imagine that, with different choices and opportunities, Stracke could have enjoyed a successful opera career, as many of his admirers claimed. In spite of this, Stracke’s singing manages to seem unpretentious and accessible; admittedly, to ears utterly unaccustomed to hearing a formally trained voice, it might still seem a bit patrician, but in the mid-twentieth century classically trained voices were much more commonly heard, on the radio and in films, than they are today. The most notable difference between how Stracke sings here and how he would presumably sing a German lied is the almost complete lack of vibrato. He also very occasionally allows a hitch or catch in his voice moving from one note to another, an expressive technique not acceptable in classical music, but for the most part he sings precisely on pitch. There is no trace of influence from African American vocal styles in his singing, as would soon become so common among popular singers of all kinds. His words are clearly pronounced in a straight Midwestern accent, appropriate to the album’s regional emphasis. Overall, his musical style authentically reflects who he was, an urban Midwestern-American with German roots and classical training, with no attempt to masquerade as any other kind of folk.

**Big Bill Broonzy**

Although he died August 15, 1958, less than a year after the opening of the Old Town School, Big Bill Broonzy is fondly remembered and even revered in the community’s collective memory (in particular, by those who emphasize older songs and traditions, like Mark Dvorak and his cohort) as a quasi-founder, and is usually referred to as just “Big Bill” in everyday discourse
around the School today. In the Armitage (Lincoln Park) location of the School, three modernist portraits hang, painted in the mid-1960s at Stracke’s request by a long-time member of the Old Town School community, Peggy Lipschutz: Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Big Bill Broonzy. The portraits are huge—each approximately four feet by six feet, and Broonzy’s is the largest—and while they currently hang in the lobby, greeting all who enter, a video from the 1980s shows that Broonzy’s portrait, at least, once hung on the stage, literally peering over the shoulder of all performers there (OTSFM 1987). His music and story—as he presented them to folk music audiences—have certainly been a source of inspiration at the School, for those who knew him personally as well as for those who only know his legacy.

Broonzy’s life and career are often compared to that of Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, though outside of Chicago and Europe, he is less well remembered. Both were Southern African-American singers who, following a career recording with urban blues combos for black audiences in the 1930s and 1940s, found professional success singing ballads and blues for largely white, middle-class audiences seeking folk authenticity.

William Lee Broonzy was born into a poor, farming family on June 16, 1893, in rural Mississippi, one of seventeen children; the family moved to Arkansas when he was a child. He had limited formal education, but extensive musical education at home, particularly from his father and an uncle. He began playing a cigar-box violin as a boy, and continued to earn a little money on the side by playing fiddle for entertainment and at church. He worked as a preacher until he found that he was in more demand as a musician; as a farmer until a drought destroyed his crops; as a coal miner; and as a soldier in World War I. And like hundreds of thousands of other rural African Americans of his time, he joined the Great Migration north in search of opportunity. He moved to Chicago in 1920, where he initially found employment with the
Pullman Company, and remained based there for most of the rest of his life (Charters 1959, 177; Lawless 1965, 49-50; Broonzy and Bruynoghe 1955, 6-10).

In Chicago, he began seriously pursuing a musical career. He became known among the local Southern black community as a good musician for “rent parties,” at which the hosts would charge guests for refreshments and drinks in order to raise money to pay the rent.

I came to Chicago and the people there asked me to come to their house. Some of them had known me at home and they knew I could play and sing the blues. […] All of them was from some part of the South and had come to Chicago to better their living. Of course I did too, but I would go back every time I got enough money to get a ticket. […] Me and Louie and Sleepy John Estes and Shorty Jackson and others we played every night for house rent parties, so in 1924 I met Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, Lonnie Johnson, Shorty George, Jim Jackson and Barbecue Bob. They all had recorded already and they talked me into trying it. I did in 1925 and I recorded the song *House Rent Stomp* and *Big Bill Blues* on August 14, 1925. But I had recorded three other songs before that, in 1924—*Gonna Tear It Down, Tod Pail Blues* and *Dying Day Blues*. They was never released by me, but by other artists later on, and I didn’t get no money out of them. (Broonzy and Bruynoghe 1955, 42-43)

Although he saw little money or professional success from records he made for Paramount in the 1920s, he continued record when he could, and by the late 1930s was recording much more frequently and successfully, leaving a significant body of recorded work.

He most likely first came to the attention of folk revivalists in 1939, through his appearance in John Hammond’s second “Spirituals to Swing” concert at Carnegie Hall. This series of concerts showcased a wide range of African American musics, bringing to the New York stage dozens of black musicians whose music would later be canonized by revivalists. After the war, with his popularity on the wane, Broonzy found himself working as a janitor at Iowa State College, surrounded by young, white students who imagined him as an “ex-sharecropper.” According to Samuel Charters, “Bill seemed to be endlessly amused by the entire situation, and with his genius for being liked and his warm personality, he was soon the center of
a group of young white folk musicians” (Charters 1959, 122). At the same time, People’s Songs was starting up in Chicago, and Broonzy, aware that Josh White was finding success singing blues to a new nightclub audience, somehow made his own way into the People’s Songs world. Around this time, through People’s Songs, Broonzy made the acquaintance of Win Stracke. The two became good friends, according to Stracke, and Stracke helped to keep Broonzy well-connected to folk music audiences for the rest of his life.

The blues Broonzy played for this audience were very different from those of his pre-war recordings. Charters sees two Big Bills: the one who recorded 260 urban blues records “complete with bleating saxophone, thundering piano and dirty lyrics,” and “the Big Bill who could stand up on a concert stage and sing work songs he’d learned from phonograph records and back country blues he’d picked up from books on country music, and fascinate the audience just talking about himself”—the first performed for a black audience, the second for a white one (Charters 1959, 123). The intellectual, white audiences were “listening to the blues as an art form,” Charters argues; “they wanted pretentiousness, and in the same manner that Josh White had done, Bill gave it to them” (ibid.). He was thus a natural to join Stracke, Terkel and Lane on the “I Come For To Sing” tour, as both an “authentic” representative of an African American musical tradition and an effective translator of that (and other) traditions to an educated, primarily white audience.

It was Stracke who suggested to Hughes Parnassié that Broonzy would do well in Europe, and, indeed, he became much more famous and successful there than in the U.S., touring and recording throughout the continent (Lawless 1965, 49-50). In this, he followed the example of his African-American predecessors in Europe, Sidney Bechet, Louis Armstrong, and more directly, Lead Belly, who was the first to introduce Europeans to rural African American styles,
and Josh White. Broonzy arrived in 1951 and was instantly popular in London and Paris, where he was promoted as the last of the great blues singers, an impression he encouraged, though in the last months of his life he explicitly passed the mantle of his European fame to artists like Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and Muddy Waters (Filene 2000, 117).

Among politically progressive circles, one of the songs Broonzy was best known for was “Black, Brown and White,” with the refrain: “They say if you’s white, you’s all right / If you’s brown, stick around / But as you’re black / Mmm, mmm, brother, git back, git back, git back”—an explicit indictment of American racial politics. Although Broonzy wrote it in 1945, and presumably performed it live then, he was not able to record it until the 1950s. He explains the problem in his co-written memoir:

I tried RCA Victor, Columbia, Decca and a lot of companies, but none of them would record it. They wanted to hear it, and after I had played and sung it they would refuse. “And why do you want to record such a song?” they would ask. “Nobody would buy it.” “What’s wrong with it? I would like to know. What I say is just about the way the working Negro is treated in this country on all jobs in the South, in the North, in the East and in the West, and you all know it’s true.” “Yes,” they would say to me, “and that’s what’s wrong with that song. You see, Bill, when you write a song and want to record it with any company, it must keep the people guessing what the song means. Don’t you say what it means when you’re singing. And that song comes right to the point and the public won’t like that.” (Broonzy and Bruynoghe 1955, 57-58)

It was Parnassié who finally agreed to record it, in France in 1951. About a year later, Alan Lomax and John Hammond saw that it was recorded and released on Mercury Records in the U.S. as well (ibid.).

In the white folk music community, Broonzy provided both a political and musical education to those who listened, a concrete example of the reasons for their ideals. OTSFM banjo teacher Fleming Brown recalled an eye-opening conversation with him:

We were sitting at the bar one night, and although I don’t remember how the subject came up, it came out that his son was a singer. I perked up, figuring that
his son would be about my age. I asked if his son sang the blues. “Oh, no,” Bill said, “he sings like a”—and Bill stammered over the word—“he sings like that fellow Billy Eckstine.” I said, “Why doesn’t he sing the blues, like you?” And Bill looked at me, like a father to a son, and in all candor he said, “Would you want to be a nigger?” That was the first time I’d ever heard him use the word. I said, “Bill, what do you mean?” And he said, “Black people don’t want to hear that—they don’t want to hear my blues. My boy sings like a white man. That’s what they want. Not what I do. They don’t want to be niggers.” That man was a great education to me. He was something else. (Fleming Brown, quoted in Holstein and Friedman 1975b, 18)

It was Broonzy’s social gifts that made him a success with people so radically different from himself in background: “He could talk to people, and he’d talk to them in a very honest, conversational way. We loved Bill. Bill was the kind of guy who didn’t have any pretensions.” (Hamilton interview 2005).

And whatever the political implications of listening to Broonzy and supporting his career, it was of course his gifts as a musician that has sustained the loyalty of the Old Town School community. “When Broonzy bent a note, that note would bend and seem to come to meet him. There was so much time between his bending of a note and the sound coming out. […] Bill never got trite. He was always full of surprises” (Fleming Brown, quoted in Holstein and Friedman 1975b, 18). Frank Hamilton, who got to know Broonzy only in his last years, remembers him as “this big, heavy-set muscular man; he sat down with that instrument, and just with a voice and guitar, he had the whole room throbbing in rhythm. He had that magnetism. He was such a dynamic performer” (Hamilton interview 2005).

A comparison of two contrasting examples of Broonzy’s playing among his many extant recordings, one for a blues audience and one for a folk audience, reveals some telling stylistic adjustments, suggesting differences in aesthetic preferences based not only in genre expectations, but in fields of musical practice. A collection of commercial recordings from the 1930s (Broonzy 1990) showcases Broonzy’s mastery of the guitar, with his complex and innovative
fingerpicking style—usually an alternating bass-chord on the lower strings and a melody on higher strings, but subject to considerable variation. He manipulates his voice, not unlike Win Stracke’s in vocal range and resonance, in a manner diametrically opposed to Stracke’s classical style—expressive through pitch and timbral manipulation, rather than smoothness, fully within the blues idiom. His 1930s recordings are topically quite similar to other blues of the time—songs about love and sex, good times and bad times, some touching on themes of urban migration, many with profane or raunchy lyrics—and were presumably marketed at a primarily black audience. On some, he is self-accompanied, while on others, he is backed by a small band featuring piano, bass, and various combinations of wind instruments—again, typical for the times—and in both cases, as much or more time is devoted to purely instrumental music, including virtuosic solos, as to the vocals. They are, of course, examples of high fidelity music making, in Turino’s sense.

The second example is an amateur recording of Broonzy playing two songs at Circle Pines, a folk school in Michigan where he was on the summer staff from time to time in the late 1950s (Broonzy, n.d.). He is performing with a group of (presumably white) children and adults who intend to sing along; his guitar is the only instrument that can be heard. “Let’s Go Out to Circle Pines,” the school song, is as foursquare a song as can be written, in a 4/4 meter with a quarter-note on every beat and a simplistic I-V-I harmonic structure supporting a predictable melody. Broonzy dramatically simplifies his guitar accompaniment in this environment, strumming little more than bouncy, quarter-note block chords, though his absent-minded noodling before and after the song is much more complex. He swings the beat on the upstroke, however, throwing in scoops and other ornaments to vary the basic guitar part, and syncopates the vocal melody throughout (it is hard to know to what extent this was his choice and to what
extent the group would have sung it that way anyway), giving rhythmic lift to an otherwise boring song. The group is clearly enjoying singing, as is Broonzy, who laughs good-naturedly when he forgets the words. The second song is “Black, Brown and White” (see above). Even though this is his own song, he plays a guitar accompaniment very similar to the preceding song, a simple, swung strumming pulse quite unlike his blues recordings. His vocal style is freer, with more rhythmic play and melodic variation from verse to verse than on “Circle Pines,” but compared to his commercial recordings, it is very restrained. The group joins him on choruses in full voice, and some attempt to keep up with the verses. These informal recordings obviously represent a participatory performance, with a presentational element in that Broonzy was clearly separate from and facing the rest of the group, entertainer as well as group leader. Broonzy has of course simplified his approach in order to facilitate group participation, but probably also to compromise between folk revival and blues aesthetic expectations.

At the height of his European fame, Broonzy was stricken with cancer of the throat and returned to the United States, just as the Old Town School was coming together. He was therefore present for the opening night and performed at several early events. As his health deteriorated, the Old Town School hosted a benefit concert for him, at which the Weavers and Mahalia Jackson memorably performed.

Frank Hamilton

Meanwhile, in the mid-1950s, a young, talented musician arrived in Chicago to play with Bob Gibson at the Gate of Horn, the nation’s first folk music nightclub. A generation younger than Win Stracke, Frank Hamilton grew up in Los Angeles, though he was born in New York City, on August 3, 1934. His mother was a piano teacher, a classicist and “a ‘grande-dame’
type,” according to Hamilton, requiring her son to study piano lessons growing up, probably in hopes that he would become a classical performer on par with her most successful student, Daniel Pollack. Hamilton also studied trombone and played in the orchestra at school where he “learned harmony, theory, and all that stuff.” But that kind of music wasn’t for him: “Well, I just kind of rebelled against the whole thing and became this flaky folkie, you know? […] I’m not sure I was that talented at [classical music], and I just wanted to do my thing” (Hamilton interview 2005).

Despite his mother’s classical style, the gentility of Hamilton’s childhood was not unwrinkled (nor, it would seem, was his mother’s taste limited to the bourgeois). Hamilton describes his stepfather as “a disturbed individual,” who “kind of floated from one job to the next, kind of bright, did a lot of writing, very morose kind of guy like Eugene O’Neil […] He came from that dark Irish background, drank a little too much. He was into motorcycles, so I grew up in the sidecar.” Hamilton did not have a close-knit family life. “I kind of was on my own most of the time. My mother was pretty much in her world and my stepfather was into a different thing, so I kind of grew up by myself” (ibid.).

In pursuing his own musical directions, Hamilton picked up the guitar first. It was his stepfather who brought one home, and began “plunking away at it.” Hamilton recalls,

I picked it up and started playing it, which made him mad [laughs]. Eventually, I kept studying it because I liked it…it was a social instrument. It put me in a social milieu. I was kind of an awkward, shy kid, I didn’t know many people and was ill at ease, socially. But when I played music I felt comfortable. So that kind of explains a lot about the Old Town School. Made people feel comfortable—made me feel comfortable to know I could play music and share it with people. (Hamilton interview 2005)

Banjo was his next passion—and, in the 1940s, a considerably less accessible one for a middle class, urban teenager. As was the case for so many mid-century folk musicians and enthusiasts,
Pete Seeger provided the exposure and the inspiration. But he credits his introduction to Pete Seeger to his aunt “who was a socialist at the time, later became a Reaganite[…] She played me a ten-inch vinyl recording, a 78 recording, called The Peekskill Story, about the Paul Robeson concert [the September 1949 concert in Westchester County, New York that sparked anti-communist riots]….And one of the songs was called ‘Hold the Line.’ I heard that banjo playing and I said, ‘My god, that’s great.’ My aunt said, ‘well that’s Pete Seeger’–she really hyped him” (ibid).

Hamilton quickly got involved in the folk music scene in southern California, and was performing on stage by the age of fifteen or sixteen with a fairly informal group called the Sierra Folksingers, whom he recalls first meeting in 1949, describing them as “a group of people who were just interested in folk songs and would accompany themselves.” The leaders were Bart van der Schelling, a veteran from the Spanish Civil War, and his wife Edna Moore, a dancer, who had moved to California from New York City, where they knew Pete Seeger and the circle of leftist folk musicians there, and brought with them the concept and practice of the hootenanny. From their home hootenannies in LA emerged the Sierra Folksingers.

We gave a little concert one night at a little hall, a little place where you had to go down a flight of steps off of Santa Monica Boulevard, and there were just a small group of people who were rabid aficionados. And I sang a song called “Sam Hall.” Here’s this fifteen, sixteen-year-old gawky, awkward kid, who looked very pale, and I’m singing this song about “God damn your eyes, and he can kiss my ruddy bum, God damn his eyes!” This very imposing gentleman, who was an actor, came up to me and said in a gravel voice, “I like the way you sing!” He wanted me to come over to his house and visit because he had a group of people he wanted me to meet. And that was Will Geer, the actor. (Hamilton interview 2005)

Will Geer, “a happy, expansive blowhard of a man,” was a lifelong friend of Woody Guthrie, and had by that time a long and rich experience in the workers theatre movement in both New York and southern California (including a role in the first performance of Blitzstein’s The
Cradle Will Rock, had supported and performed for farm and factory workers in numerous strikes, often with Guthrie at his side, and had also acted in more than a dozen Hollywood films by that time; he was also responsible for introducing Pete Seeger to Guthrie (Denning 1997, 269, 285; Klein 1980, 130, 157). Hamilton of course took Geer up on his invitation to his house in Topanga Canyon, which Joe Klein describes as “a remarkable compound, which included a huge garden and a public theater […] a halfway house of sorts for lost souls and refugees from the political storms of the period” (Klein 1980, 402). There he met, of all opportune encounters, the Weavers. This was 1950, and the Weavers were playing at a “posh” nightclub in LA, riding the swell of their success on the pop charts with songs like “On Top of Old Smoky” and “Goodnight Irene,” but on the verge of being blacklisted, as was Geer, just as Win Stracke was experiencing similar threats to his career in Chicago. Hamilton recalls that they were starting to get nervous, encountering protests and picket lines where they were performing. On this visit to Geer’s home, Hamilton had the chance to watch Pete Seeger play banjo up close, and remembers Seeger as “very cordial and generous.” Cisco Houston was also there, “one of the first folksingers I’d ever heard, and he just captivated me,” Hamilton recalls (Hamilton interview 2005).

It is clear that Hamilton was immediately recognized by Geer, Seeger, and their friends and colleagues as one of their kind. Through these social connections, he quickly made the acquaintance of many of the leading lights in folk music at the time, and of many who would become such leaders later on. Hamilton’s musical gifts and enthusiasm for folk music doubtless shone through and inspired his elders; even today, as an elder himself, Hamilton’s open and guileless manner makes an immediate impression and invites connection—musical connection in particular. In this way, Hamilton was brought into the circle of the leaders of the Popular Front folksong movement. Hamilton’s own generation, sandwiched between them and the folk
music fans who would come of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was not one known for their enthusiasm for folk music, and it would seem that his early influences were in fact people almost a generation older than himself, people who, like the Weavers, Stracke, and Terkel, had seen their movement peak and now were facing the persecutions of McCarthyism.

One such influence on Hamilton was Bess Lomax Hawes. Bess was no less influential on the development of American understanding of its own musical traditions (under the rubric of “folk music”) than her father John Lomax, collector and early sound recorder of cowboy songs, or her brother Alan Lomax, collector, archivist, scholar, and general folk impresario, but in her own way, through education and administration. Her education and training in folklore and musicology began early, assisting John and Alan collaborate with Ruth Crawford Seeger for the compendium *Our Singing Country*. Young Bess was impressed by Ruth and Charles Seeger, “professional, academically trained, avant garde, politically radical, totally up-to-the-minute musicians” who nonetheless “could and did stand in awe of the musical achievements of old country ladies, black stevedores, Mexican field workers, Ohio canal boat captains, and all the other amazing casts of characters my father and brother had been for so long re-introducing to their homeland audiences[…] Hearing Ruth and Charles Seeger professionally and seriously discussing the musical qualities of field hollers and banjo tunes opened a door that I hadn’t known was closed and made me literally face the music” (Hawes 1995, 181).

As a young, college-educated woman in the 1940s, she belonged to the small, tight-knit group of leftist folk musicians in New York City. She performed in the seminal “Grapes of Wrath” benefit concert hosted by Will Geer in March 1940, alongside Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, Burl Ives, Pete Seeger and her brother Alan. The following year, she joined the Almanac Singers, founded by Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Lampell, and John Peter Hawes, whom she
would marry. A loosely formed group who performed and recorded topical songs primarily for AFL-CIO and Communist audiences, the Almanacs had dissolved by the end of the war, to become the core of People’s Songs (Lieberman 1989, 52-59). From this point on, Hawes’s career began to move away from performing and towards teaching, administration, and public advocacy. Hawes was always practical about making a living, in contrast to some of her bohemian friends. She first began teaching to supplement her income in Boston, where she somehow she arrived at the notion of teaching students in groups—not only as matter of convenience (less time for the teacher, less cost for each student), but as a beneficial social value. The Hawes moved to Los Angeles in 1951 and Bess brought this teaching method with her; Hamilton believes it was unknown in LA at the time (Hamilton interview 2005).

What is recorded and recalled of Hawes’s teaching methods in the 1950s supports Hamilton’s assertion that the core of the method of teaching he brought to the Old Town School was inspired by her approach. In a short article for Sing Out! Magazine in 1961, Hawes outlines her approach to teaching singing, with the benefit of several years experience and success. The philosophical bottom line—as at the Old Town School—is that making music is not a specialist activity but something that is and should be accessible to everyone: “[S]inging is a natural thing, like speech, for which we need special training only in special circumstances. In fact, the first thing to know about singing is that it is an extension of speech” (Hawes 1961, 25). She is keenly aware of the reluctance of the average American to sing, and that discouragement in childhood is often the source, and identifies a vicious circle which must be broken: “you won’t sing because you can’t sing, and you can’t because you won’t” (ibid., 26).

She proceeds to offer very specific instructions to the person wishing to learn to sing, followed by even more specific pointers to teachers of singing. First of these recommendations
is, “I highly recommend singing with a group. You will find much more privacy in a crowd than in a private lesson with a voice coach where you have to do it all by yourself; besides, group singing is fun, relaxing and sharpens your ear” (Hawes 1961, 26). She recommends learning guitar or banjo mainly as a distraction from singing, to reduce anxiety about one’s voice: “The student is so busy trying to play that he doesn’t even notice that he’s singing” (ibid.). She also recommends against learning to read music, simply because it’s not necessary, and suggests singing from memory instead, which improves the ear. Most of all, Hawes recommends a positive approach, where encouragement is the mode of teaching rather than criticism. To teachers, she advises, “Use every device you can think of to encourage listening, relaxation and confidence” (ibid., 27). All of these practical points, as well as the rationale she gives for each, could have been echoed by Hamilton or any number of Old Town School teachers that I spoke with forty-five years later (though with the emphasis usually on instrumental rather than vocal music); I am confident that very few of them have come across this article, however.

Hamilton recalls that the emphasis in Hawes’s classes was very much on singing, with guitar, banjo and fiddle serving only as accompaniment instruments—“she was playing oom-plunk and, you know, basic stuff,” remembers Hamilton.

She had a knack for pulling people in because of her love and enthusiasm for folk music, and getting them to sing and encouraging them. She was very organized, too. She was a Bryn Mawr gal. She had a lot of musical ability, and background and experience behind her, so she knew how to do this kind of thing. She also was like Dawn [Greening] in that she was very good with people, on a one-to-one [basis]. Comfortable, relaxed, homey. She was from Texas, you know. She had that Texas graciousness[….] She saw that as kind of a mission, to get people to understand the music. (Hamilton interview 2005)

Her classes were very successful—Hamilton recalls eighty people in her class at UCLA—and her method spread quickly, as her students began starting classes all around the LA area. “It was almost like the same kind of thing that happened at the Old Town School,” Hamilton observed,
“but LA is spread out. So they’d have one in Claremont and one in Pomona, and one out in Santa Monica—you could always plan to go to a guitar class” (*ibid.*). These scattered classes, all operating in the same group format with the same guiding philosophy that anyone can learn basic singing skills, eventually became a loose-knit group called the Songmakers, and a meeting could be found somewhere in the city almost every night.

The Songmakers phenomenon had not quite taken hold yet when Hamilton was still in LA. He was invited to sit in on her classes unofficially, to accompany and “to kibbitz.” Barely more than a teenager, his guitar fingerpicking was apparently already in demand. He judges that he was “probably overrated, but it was a situation where I was doing it and nobody else was for a while.” In these classes, Hamilton says, “I would be rapt and interested in what she was doing, and saw her techniques, and started developing my own on that basis[…] I took what she did and adapted it from a more instrumental standpoint, getting people to play little accompaniments and bass runs and chordal structures[….] But the basic idea of social teaching, music as being a catalyst for bringing people together on a social level, I think we owe that to Bess” (Hamilton interview 2005).

Interestingly, Hawes herself did not know that she had had this influence on the Old Town School until David Roche, who was acquainted with her from National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) work, mentioned it to her in the early 2000s. “So I got in touch with her, ‘Do you remember Frank Hamilton?’ She didn’t even remember—‘Frank Hamilton? Oh, yes, whatever happened to him?’ She had no idea that she is the alma mater, really, of this institution, is Bess Lomax Hawes. I mean, she had no idea” (Roche interview 2005a). Roche may be guilty of a bit of overstatement here, giving Hawes a key founding role in his origin story for the School; Hamilton was careful to remind me that while her teaching was “the jumping-off point,” most of
OTSFM’s distinctive elements were his own invention (personal communication with the author, 2010).

In 1953, Hamilton embarked on a folk music odyssey with Guy Carawan and Jack Elliott: “the three of us hit the road together in search of American folk music,” he told Ron Cohen in 1990 (Cohen 2002, 4). Cohen selected this particular episode as the prologue to his *Rainbow Quest: the Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970*, a broad yet comprehensively detailed account of the New York-California axis of the same musical world that gave rise to the Old Town School in Chicago. To Cohen, “the trip through the South not only captured a telling moment in the lives of the folk singers, but also connected to the various traditional commercial and political aspects of what would become a folk revival throughout the English-speaking world.” It was an iteration of the kind of journey that had already become a rite of passage *de rigeur* for aspiring interpreters of vernacular American music, and would become almost a cliché for the generation coming of age just a few years later.

Hamilton had first met Guy Carawan through the Sierra Folk Singers at home in California. Hamilton had set out for New York in the summer of 1953, apparently his first major departure from California. “I’d put my underwear in my guitar case and I went out Route 66” (Hamilton interview 2005). It was Pete Seeger who actually invited Hamilton to New York, and from there, he had plans with Carawan to hit the road. While listening to Brownie McGhee at a bar in Harlem, they both met Jack Elliott for the first time who, upon hearing their plans for an adventure to the South, immediately pleaded to come along (Cohen 2002, 3). Though only three years older than Hamilton, Elliott was already an experienced traveler and musician, having left his home in Brooklyn at sixteen on a similar adventure to the American West; he had already met and fashioned himself a disciple of Woody Guthrie by this time (Poe 2001). Carawan
recalled that Elliott was “not bashful about being out and busking, singing in the street, passing the hat and raising money in public places” (Cohen 2002, 3), which seemed an asset to the two young men. Before leaving New York, they visited Lee Hays and Toshi Seeger, Pete’s wife, and on their way south, they stopped in to visit Mike Seeger, further developing their connections in the folk music revival world.

Their summer in the South took them to the home of A.P. Carter, patriarch of the Carter Family, who reminisced and sang with them. They visited Bascom Lamar Lunsford in Asheville, North Carolina, founder of the Asheville Folk Festival (then in its twenty-fifth year) and the man who had introduced a teenaged Pete Seeger to the five-string banjo in 1936; they were bitterly disappointed to find him a conservative anti-Communist and anti-Semite, suspicious of the young men’s politics and not especially welcoming (Cohen 2002, 6). They also stopped at the John C. Campbell Folk School, founded in 1925 by one of the first Americans to hunt for “folk songs” in the South, Olivia Campbell, followed by a visit to the Highlander Folk School, founded in 1932 by northern labor activists to educate "rural and industrial leaders for a new social order” (Highlander Center Website), just as they were shifting their focus from labor to civil rights; Carawan would later return and become a leader there. They stopped in at the Grand Old Opry in Nashville, where they met banjo players Earl Scruggs and Grandpa Jones (who helped Hamilton replace his banjo head with one of his own)—though they apparently found it too “commercial.” Finally, in New Orleans, they located banjo player Billy Faier—another young New Yorker who had devoted his life to learning traditional music and had made his way south and west. Elliott, Hamilton and Faier played and listened to jazz together, and Hamilton even sat in with a Dixieland group on a borrowed trombone. Faier returned to New
York City with them, but all four quickly scattered across the country, chasing folk music dreams throughout the 1950s (Cohen 2002, 6).

Hamilton apparently spent the next couple of years shuttling between New York City and California—his own memory is vague on the chronology of the period and in my interviews with him, he seems to have conflated his initial trip to New York, just described, with the later one that led him to Chicago (he himself referred me to books, rather than rely on his memory for dates). At some point, he and Guy Carawan were in New York to replace the Tarriers at a particular venue (Hamilton interview 2005). The Tarriers were a precursor to the massively popular Kingston Trio, bringing a blend of North American traditional tunes and Caribbean calypso to a commercial audience, inspired by the success of the Weavers and Harry Belafonte; their founder, Eric Darling, replaced Pete Seeger in the Weavers in 1959, only to be replaced himself three years later by Frank Hamilton. Since Darling did not begin assembling the Tarriers from Washington Square regulars until 1955, and Hamilton was in Chicago by the end of 1956, this trip would presumably have occurred in 1955 or 1956 (Hamilton 2005; Cohen 2002, 99; Samuelson 2001).

On this trip to New York, Hamilton made the acquaintance of a rising young Chicago-based folksinger named Bob Gibson (1931-1996). Born a New Yorker of Anglo-Irish descent and raised outside the city in what were then the ex-urbs, Gibson was a born entertainer. Like so many of the young men profiled in this chapter, he embarked on an American odyssey as a teenager—in this case, literally running away from trouble at home and at school twice during his senior year of high school to hitchhike around the American West. He was recognized as a good musician, but was deterred by the discipline required for a classical music education. Gibson became an able businessman and salesman, a successful partner in a business that sold
speed-reading lessons, maintaining music as a hobby, when he happened to spend a life-changing day with Pete Seeger in 1953. A visit to Seeger’s home, helping him with the masonry on his house, revealed to Gibson a whole world of traditional songs, and he bought himself a banjo and started frequenting Washington Square, soon to pursue a folksinging career full time (Gibson and Bender, 1999, 1-3, 5-19).

Gibson traveled around the rural U.S. and the Caribbean, using his salesman’s charm to collect old songs from the locals, and shuttled between performing gigs in Cleveland, Miami, and New York. He arrived in Chicago in 1955, “a guy with a banjo and a crew cut, singing calypso and Appalachian Mountain ballads,” and at first had trouble finding the right kind of club (Gibson and Bender 1999, 29). Meanwhile, Albert Grossman was starting up the Gate of Horn and having trouble finding the right acts for it. In short order, they found each other and Bob Gibson became one of the Gate’s first headliners, the one credited with giving the famous folk venue its musical identity. Gibson had a steady gig at the Gate of Horn for eleven months straight, and made regular appearances for years afterwards, steadily gaining fame as popular interest in folk music grew. By the early 1960s, Gibson was a national star; it was he who introduced Joan Baez “to the world” at the 1959 Newport Folk Festival (ibid., 38). He does not today have the legendary status of Baez, Bob Dylan, or other superstars of the Folk Boom, apparently not capturing the public imagination in quite the same iconic way, lacking the air of “authenticity” they communicated. Drug use also played into the decline of his career; he disappeared from performing altogether in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. But Bob Gibson was legitimately one of the first popular performers to successfully give the repertoire and ethos of the folk music community a commercial gloss and a clean-cut image, propelling it into the popular market and broader visibility. Gibson was indelibly associated with the Gate of Horn,
and with Chicago’s folk music scene generally, for a generation; although his professional involvement with the Old Town School was never deep (he taught a few classes there over the years and performed there many times), he was an influential figure in the North Side Chicago folk music community.

Gibson was, like so many others, apparently taken with Hamilton’s musicality and enthusiasm and invited him to join him in Chicago at the Gate of Horn, where he was “holding court” (Hamilton interview 2005). “I ended up staying on Rush Street with Bob Gibson in this crazy pad, with all these wild characters—it was quite a ‘scene,’ you might say, in those days. Bob was doing some minimal teaching, he had students because of his association with the Gate of Horn, and his fan club[….] So I decided, this would be an appropriate thing to do this to tide things over” (ibid.). Hamilton took various guitar and banjo students, drawn from the community centered on the Gate of Horn, including members of the Greening family, who were to become key supporters of the Old Town School: husband Nate on banjo, his son Lance on guitar.

With Gibson’s and the Gate’s introduction, Hamilton was in Chicago for at least six months, maybe a year, before encountering Dawn Greening and Win Stracke, “playing at the Gate of Horn the whole time, really accompanying Bob, but I had my own little set, too, because I was ‘going to be a performer’—you know how those things are” (Hamilton interview 2005). Although Hamilton is not mentioned in Gibson’s official biography, it seems as though he was under consideration to become Gibson’s partner, a job that eventually went to Hamilton Camp. Frank Hamilton had, of course, his own style and his own appeal, distinct from Gibson’s, and was developing his own Chicago following. Win Stracke recalled ten years later, “When Frank Hamilton did come to ‘The Gate’[….] he amazed everyone with his facility, his creative
improvisational ability, and a certain playful joyousness that he brought to all aspects of
traditional music” (Stracke 1967, 1). The audience he was developing and the friendships that resulted would become the core of the Old Town School.

Dawn Greening

Dawn Greening is regarded as essentially the third founder of the Old Town School. Although not on the articles of incorporation or officially employed in any capacity by the School during its first few years, Dawn played a key role in facilitating its existence and, perhaps most importantly, setting its social tone.

Dawn was a delightful woman. She was the heart and soul of the Old Town School because of her capacity for bringing people in on a social level. She was just so great with that. She could talk to anybody. You’re a truck driver, no problem; you’re a university professor, no problem. She’d find something, find a hook, and she’d getcha in there! She was a people person, an Earth mother. (Hamilton interview 2005)

Because Dawn was never really a public figure, there is only the little that has been written about her within the Old Town School (Stracke 1967; Romanoski 1980; Holstein 1980; Grayson 1992, which mostly draws on Romanoski’s article) and the recollections of a few people still alive today that I had the opportunity to speak to—Frank Hamilton and Ted Johnson, primarily. As a consequence, many of the sentiments expressed are glowing tributes tinged with gratitude and nostalgia—and, in the 1980 reminiscences, sadness at her impending departure from Chicago. Thus, the portrait I am able to draw of her is necessarily composed almost entirely of accounts that idealize her and the role that she played, and should be read—much more than the other profiles in this chapter—as part of the Old Town School and the Chicago folk music community’s own memory project.
The entire Greening family was involved in folk music and supported the Old Town School in various ways; even their generously sized house in the suburb of Oak Park played a role. Dawn was a housewife and mother of four; her husband Nate was in the concrete business, “in some kind of contracting capacity as a scientist” (Hamilton interview 2005). “Of course, Nate was extremely responsible because it was in his home, and he actually subsidized those classes, and should be given credit for that. If it wasn’t for Nate’s support, I don’t think there would have been an Old Town School” (Hamilton interview 2006). They were, by all accounts, a warm and open family.

They were almost an embodiment of that Midwestern, egalitarian, labor-oriented, let’s-take-care-of-the-common-man, -common-people, give-’em-a-break, common playing field, ecologically sound environment—all those things. For me, they were an embodiment of all those ideas. And they lived that way, too. They weren’t high rollers financially. They didn’t make a lot of money. I think Nate did pretty well with his concrete business, but they lived very modestly, I think, compared to a lot of people. But they were oriented towards knowing people and bringing them into their home. And the Greenings, it’s a whole interesting history of folk music in and of itself, because they cultivated all of these folk performers and had them actually at their house, staying with them. And you know, Dawn was really great that way. (ibid.)

In a somewhat sentimental 1980 account by Steve Romanoski, a Chicago writer and bluegrass aficionado, presumably based on uncited interviews and conversations with Dawn Greening and subtitled “The Mother of Us All,” her involvement in the Chicago folk music scene is dated to 1955, when she took her son Lance to a music store to look for a guitar and someone who could teach “folk-style guitar”—not an easy thing to find in those days. Impulsively, she bought a 1916 Vega/Fairbanks Whyte Laydie banjo as well, for only seventeen dollars. Soon after, she and Nate heard Studs Terkel interview Bob Gibson on WFMT radio; struck by his style, they went out to hear him, venturing to the Gate of Horn for the first time. It was Dawn’s banjo that sparked the Greenings’ initial friendship within Chicago’s folk music
community, when Gibson asked to buy it with $150 and banjo lessons. The Greenings’—
especially Dawn’s—relationships with Gibson and an ever-growing cast of musicians who
performed at the Gate of Horn only deepened from there.

The Greening residence became well known as the place where folksingers visiting
Chicago would stay, and where locals would gather—Pete Seeger, Odetta, Joan Baez, and
dozens of others passed through their home in the 1950s and 1960s. Frank remembers, “I don’t
know how Nate Greening stood it. All these crazy people. I remember Peggy Seeger coming
through town, and getting on the phone—she was staying at the Greening residence—the phone
would ring and she’d answer, ‘Seeger residence!’ That must have driven Nate crazy!” (Hamilton
interview 2005). Dawn’s hospitality soon extended into the Old Town School, trying to ensure
that everyone feel at home there, while still keeping her own home open to musicians.

She, with her husband Nate and their children, brought a pervasive warmth and a
delicate diplomacy in the day to day familial relations of staff, teachers, and
students. The Greenings allowed their home to become a hospitality center for
visiting performers. Many now famous, but then impecunious singers basked in
the warmth of the house on Lombard Avenue and have a deep affection not only
for the Greenings, but for the school as well. Dawn has given countless parties
for the faculty which have served to unify our teachers in strong feelings of
loyalty to our purpose. The volunteer contributions from the student body and
friends of painting, electrical work, carpentry, office tasks, and other work, as a
result of Dawn’s persuasive guidance have been remarkable. (Stracke 1967, 5)

Despite her obvious love of music, Dawn herself was not an especially accomplished
musician—though, as Hamilton pointed out,

FH: That depends on what you consider being musical. She had a great
appreciation for music, she loved it[...] And this was because Dawn had this
kind of rapport[...] So she had this ability to just draw in people. And that, in a
sense, is what folk music is all about. From my standpoint, she embodied what
folk music was all about. [...] 

TL: And so her musicality was, in fact, social.
FH: Social. Yeah, she never sang—or she might have sang for fun—but she wasn’t a singer per se, she wasn’t a *performer* per se. She was an appreciator and a catalyst. (Hamilton interview 2006)

Jo Mapes, one of the Gate of Horn regulars, both on and off stage, recalled:

My fondest memory of Dawn was on the stairway at Mother Blues. The house was full and we were […] listening to someone on stage and singing along. Dawn was caught up in the spirit and was gustily singing and that big happy voice of hers sailed over the banister. I looked at her, loving what I was hearing and seeing. She was lustily singing, in a key that still defies identification. Or maybe she covered five or six, but it didn’t matter. Her face was beaming that wonderful big smile and happy eyes made her a celebration itself. I loved it. Her spirit and warmth gave the school something rare. (Quoted in Grayson 1992, 5)

Fred Holstein, who would become one of the mainstays of the Chicago folk music scene in the 1970s and 1980s, shared an anecdote demonstrating her legendary generosity and helpfulness.

She knew that I worshipped Pete Seeger; when I first met Dawn, I was trying to grow up to be Pete. Soon after I met her, he came to town to give a concert. She came up to me at the concert, grabbed my arm, said “come on over here,” and led me over to a corner. There in the corner sat Pete. I was shaking! Dawn said, “Pete, I want you to meet somebody,” and introduced me. Then she invited me to go out to her house with Seeger and several other people. I was flabbergasted—I was only nineteen or twenty, and I had not known her long at all. But she knew how much it meant to me, and so I passed that evening sitting on Dawn’s floor, watching Pete talk with Studs Terkel and Win Stracke. What a wonderful thing for her to do for someone she hardly knew! But she did things like that for everyone. (Holstein 1980)

“Warmth,” “love,” “happiness,” and “mother” are words that constantly recur in recollections of Dawn. She seems, indeed, to represent the mother of the Old Town School—in recollections of her roles as the institution’s “homemaker” (she and her family kept up the school’s physical environs) and provider of love and cookies (always provided at Second Half); and in assessments of her legacy, as the originator of the welcoming, inclusive social environment the Old Town School aspires to perfect.
Hamilton remembers Chicago in the 1950s as “kind of like a big small town—everyone knows each other, everybody’s involved with one another”—referring, of course, to the social networks that interconnected with the folk music community. Indeed, it is not much different today—within certain social strata or interest groups, social life in Chicago is not at all unlike a small town, disbursed over a large geographical area. Within these networks, Dawn Greening was one of several social organizers—a role still important around the Old Town School today (see Chapter 8). Just as Hamilton’s Sierra Folksingers had imported the hootenanny to LA from New York, the Greenings brought it to Chicago after visiting a friend in New York who hosted a singalong. “All of the folks there were ‘professional people’ who didn’t really know what to expect from this new game. Dawn remembered having had a simply wonderful time, and wanted to share that feeling with the students and friends at her home” (Romanoski 1980, 7).

According to Hamilton:

The community was melded by the Sunday afternoon hootenannies that Bob Gibson initiated at Gate of Horn. Everybody came down and sang; we had all kinds of people: Osborne, Smith, Bob Acherd from the Barn Dance, the cowboy singer. People just came and sang, and it was just like a hootenanny should be, which was very informal, relaxed, people got up on stage and did their thing and everybody loved it. So there was kind of a melded community, and of course Dawn was terrific—she was a community unto herself, really! (Hamilton interview 2005)

The above quotation was part of Hamilton’s explanation of how those present at the School’s opening night knew to be there. The existing social network of folk music lovers in Chicago was centered on the Gate of Horn and Dawn was, by virtue of her energy, enthusiasm, talent for organizing, and warm, outgoing personality, able to mobilize that community to support a new venture, “a catalyst for the folk community” indeed (Hamilton interview 2005).

It was another up-and-coming folksinger who finally connected Hamilton to Dawn Greening and, through her, to Win Stracke. Odetta was a good friend of Hamilton’s from Los
Angeles and was staying at the Greening residence in Oak Park, one of the constant stream of folksingers Dawn hosted. Born and raised in Los Angeles, Odetta (1930-2008) had been classically trained but committed herself to a career in folk music since discovering it in the late 1940s, one of the few African American performers emerging from within the folk revival scene. By the time of this visit to Chicago, she had already performed a year’s engagement at the Tin Angel in San Francisco and a shorter run at the Blue Angel in New York City and had recorded her first LP (her 1957 engagement at the Gate of Horn was to become her second album).

According to both Hamilton and Romanoski, Odetta announced to Dawn one evening that she was going to go see her friend Frank at the Gate of Horn. “And Dawn got very angry because she’d already set up dinner for Odetta—‘Why do you wanna go see him? You’re supposed to have dinner with us.’ But Odetta said, ‘No, I’ve gotta go see him. Why don’t you come with me?’ Dawn begrudgingly came down and saw me. And we started talking, and we really hit it off” (Hamilton interview 2005).

**Dawn’s Living Room**

The first step to actually creating the Old Town School of Folk Music—though Dawn Greening surely did not realize it at the time—was holding group guitar classes in the Greenings’ living room in the second half of 1957. Hamilton recalls this as the Greenings’ idea originally, specifically Dawn’s; he was already teaching Nate and Lance Greening and perhaps to a lesser extent, two of the Greening girls, as well as a few other students around town to earn supplemental income. With their penchant for opening their home to musicians, it must have seemed a natural extension to the Greenings to invite interested friends to join in the learning experience, at two dollars per lesson. Hamilton, having already apprenticed with Bess Lomax
Hawes in her large classes at UCLA, was well prepared to try a group approach, though he had not yet done it on his own. “The class just sort of grew, which has been my experience with those things. They just start and new people come in.” (Hamilton interview 2005). There were about fifteen students, most or all of whom had made it there by way of the Gate of Horn (Stracke 1967, 1; Romanoski 1980, 7).

“One night, a big portly gentleman, broad features and a booming voice with a big guitar came in and said, ‘I want to study to learn to play up the neck of the guitar’” (Hamilton interview 2005). Win Stracke was acquainted with the Greenings through Chicago folk music circles, and had already heard Hamilton at the Gate of Horn. Whatever his initial impulse for joining the class at the Greenings, Stracke soon realized that Hamilton’s teaching presented the opportunity to realize a much larger dream—his “hunch,” as Stracke later called it. It is not quite clear to anyone I’ve spoken to, looking back, just how well defined Stracke’s idea for a school of folk music was before meeting Frank Hamilton. It does seem that the missing piece up until that point was a workable pedagogical approach of the kind that Hamilton offered.

Following Hawes’s model, Hamilton taught everyone together in one room in a participatory framework, giving each student something to learn at his or her own level, which nonetheless could fit in with what other students were playing. Hamilton’s approach, however, was more sophisticated, being more instrumentally oriented and covering a greater range of skill levels and playing techniques. Ted Johnson, who was one of Hamilton’s students in the Greening home and later became the first teacher hired at the Old Town School, after Stracke and Hamilton, recalls,

[Frank] started having these classes where he would get people of different levels all in the same room and he’d somehow magically get us all to…he’d have the advanced people doing this and the elementary people doing this and it went
together, and maybe in another room he’d have the banjos and he’d go back and forth and it was very exciting. (Johnson interview 2005)

Or, in Stracke’s written description, “[H]ere was lanky, wraithlike, mercurial Frank, with a word here, and a finger adjustment there, teaching us simultaneously, and involving us in the pleasure of singing and playing folksongs” (Stracke 1967, 1).

The first song Hamilton taught was “The Sloop John B.,” according to Romanoski’s information, a West Indian song popularized in the U.S. by Carl Sandburg’s 1927 American Songbag (in other words, a folk music standard by then). Other songs were often brought in directly from the Gate of Horn. “A concert by Miriam Makeba would lead to an African song being taught; a Shoshanna Demorri performance would produce lessons in Israeli or Yemenite music. The resultant eclecticism was amazing; the music ranged from traditional mountain tunes to international songs and everything in between” (Romanoski 1980, 7).

It did not take long for Stracke to act on his inspiration and propose a new project to Hamilton. Stracke recalled, “[I]t was about three or four weeks after [joining the Greening house classes], beginning while driving Frank home along the newly completed Congress Street Expressway, that I suggested we organize a school around him in which he would use the same dining room technique for considerably larger classes” (Stracke 1967, 2). Ted Johnson might have caught wind of it even before Hamilton did: “Win Stracke, who already had a reputation around Chicago for other things, I remember even now him sitting next to me saying, ‘You know, I’m gonna start a school around this.’ Because the techniques that Frank was using were so effective, somehow sort of cut through so many things, that Win saw the magic in it, I think, the possibility in it” (Johnson interview 2005). In addition to their clear, pragmatic effectiveness, what resonated with Stracke about Hamilton’s techniques was the sociopolitical orientation that underpinned them:
He liked the way I taught, ‘cause I had learned from Bess, and this whole social orientation towards teaching was a whole new thing. It was kind of instinctive with me, because I grew up in the folk music movement, mainly in left-wing circles. Social aspects of the music were very important to me. Win recognized that, and we kind of clicked. He said, “You know, I’d like to take your teaching style, the way you’re doing it, and see if we can fuse it into an idea that I’ve had for some time about a school of folk music.” (Hamilton interview 2005)

As Stracke’s and Hamilton’s biographies above illustrate, they moved in very nearly the same circles on the national level—as the Greenings did on the local level—and had several acquaintances in common, as Hamilton confirmed to me.

TL: Now, how similar were those—you’re coming from LA, he’s coming from Chicago—how similar were those worlds, how tied were there. Did you know people in common?

FH: Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah. They were tied. They were tied[……] It worked nationwide, so we could go into the leftwing community and be on the same frame of reference, in a different city. So I could go up to New York and meet the same people who I’d met in California, or people who had expatriated to California for the movie industry if they’re in the entertainment business, or whatever it was, and we could still talk the same language.

TL: And were the Greenings also from that background?

FH: Absolutely. Absolutely. The Greenings were definitely from that background. (Hamilton interview 2006)

It was this shared background that enabled this core group to coalesce so naturally around a common understanding of music as inherently social.

In addition to the initial inspiration and a share of the guiding philosophy, Win Stracke brought to the project local stature, a business plan and a lifetime of practical experience. He was already renting a studio in the old Immigrant Bank building on North Avenue and volunteered that space for the School. He also provided the start-up capital—one thousand dollars, according to the official agreement (though there is no reason to believe that what is stated legally on paper had any direct relation to reality). From the beginning, Stracke was
thinking in realistic terms about issues of compensation and tuition, envisioning the school as a form of support for working musicians. “I remember saying [to Hamilton] that he could reasonably expect an income of thirteen thousand dollars during the first year from the school and outside employment—a prediction which happily turned out to be accurate” (Stracke interview 1967, 2). Gertrude Soltker, Stracke’s neighbor and old friend from their theatre days, came on board as an experienced arts administrator to develop an organizational structure for the enterprise and launch it properly. She likely designed how students would be registered, how much tuition they would pay, how the School would be managed, and similar matters. Both Soltker and Stracke were connected to extensive Chicago networks and worked together to publicize and promote the School in the weeks prior to opening night; a press release must have been issued, since more than one reporter was present.

It was not until a little while after opening night that the Preorganization Agreement was actually signed, stating:

1. That the parties hereto shall organize or cause to be organized, under the laws of the State of Illinois, a corporation which shall be known as OLD TOWN FOLK MUSIC SCHOOL, INC., or by such other name as the parties hereto shall select.
2. That the purposes for which said corporation shall be formed are generally as follows:
   A. To coach, teach and instruct music and the playing of musical instruments.
   B. To lease, rent, own, purchase and sell real and personal property.
   C. To do all things deemed necessary in the organization and management of a school of music, with particular emphasis on the teaching and studying of folk music. (OTSFM-RC)

Conclusion

The roots of the Old Town School reach back through the histories of the Popular Front and its Folk Song Movement, mid-century trends in Chicago arts and entertainment, the
McCarthyite blacklist and its consequences for performers and the stirrings of the Folk Boom. The tangents and tributaries to the central narrative in this chapter are deliberate, an effort to show the interconnectedness of the revivalists of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. The narratives I have received and shared on the founding and the founders of the Old Town School are not written on a clean slate. Over the past fifty years, they have been selected and refined and in some cases nearly codified into a master narrative of Old Town School history. Even when they were fresh, Hamilton, Stracke and the others naturally and inevitably fit their own stories—and the stories they told about others—to resonate with existing narratives on the quests of young men and the search for the “People.”

Both Win Stracke and Frank Hamilton launched themselves into manhood by leaving home on cross-country journeys to discover rural and working-class America, of which the most memorable spoils seem to have been songs (Hamilton, of course, set off with a musical agenda, while Stracke appears to have found it only along the way). Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, Jack Elliott, Guy Carawan, Bob Gibson, Billy Faier and countless other urban, middle-class, male musicians connected with the folk music world all embarked on such odysseys in the early to mid-twentieth century; the younger of these could recognize their expeditions as an almost required rite of passage for becoming a musician, while the older ones might instead have tied it to the romantic image of the hobo. “The kids around Washington Square had a Rousseauian view of folk singers,” Hamilton reflected years later. “We were all kind of wide eyed. We were the prisoners of the big city and we romanticized the freedom and virtue of country life” (quoted in Cohen 2002, 7). Not only did these journeys shape the young men’s sense of themselves as having earned a certain right to the tunes they played, through direct contact with their supposedly authentic sources, but in practical terms, it also helped create a
nationwide network of both like-minded souls, as these men crossed paths and traveled with each other, and of the rural, tradition-based musicians they sought and encountered, all of whom would contribute to the explosion of concerts, festivals, recordings and even books of the coming Folk Boom.

Stracke’s and Hamilton’s hunger for worldly experience and musical knowledge and their national and (in Stracke’s case, international) journeys in search of it were not unique, but in feeding this experience and knowledge into the creation of a community school, Stracke and Hamilton added a dimension to the typical folk revival narrative. Rather than stardom and a personal body of work—which they did, at times, seek—their most visible legacy has been the Old Town School. As gifted teachers who maintained a central commitment to music as a participatory, social activity and possessed an intellectual and practical framework for realistically pursuing such an ideal through their involvement with the politics of the Popular Front, they were equipped to build an institution.

In contrast to the men, Dawn Greening’s master narrative is that of the ideal mother, a paragon of domesticity extended beyond her own home to create a home for all folk musicians in Chicago through the Old Town School and the Gate of Horn. The Old Town School’s “Earth mother,” she is credited with the grounding of the Old Town School, with creating and nurturing the affective ties that must form the glue of any institution or group if it is to survive.

Although Big Bill Broonzy does not appear to have played any pedagogical or organizational role in the creation of the School, it is remarkable how important his memory remains there. His music has often been played and heard around the Old Town School, then and now, it has not been the core of the repertoire, over and above that of other musicians. He perhaps lends an element of folk “authenticity” to the origin story, the only one of the core
founding group who was not urban-born, middle class, well educated or, of course, white—the only one who could bring his “own” music to the table and call it “folk.” His support of the School offers a claim of legitimacy to a school of folk music.

If these narratives emphasize certain folk revival tropes, they have been quiet on other things. For example, in November of 1957, just before opening night, Frank Hamilton married Sheila Lofton, an African American painter, and less than a year later, they had a son together (Lawless 1960, 108). The marriage was short-lived and ended in divorce. This rather significant fact is almost never mentioned by anyone I read or spoke to. It is not a secret—Hamilton alluded to it a couple of times in my interviews with him. If I had asked him directly about the relationship, I’m sure he would have answered, but to him in 2005 it was not an important part of the larger story he was telling me. No doubt part of the reason for this de-emphasis is that no one likes to remember a failed marriage, neither the parted couple nor their friends. But it also brings a more prosaic element into the story: Hamilton had a growing need for a steady income.

Meanwhile, Win Stracke’s career had been severely limited by his blacklisting and he was unable to work on television any longer. With his television successes of the early 1950s, Stracke had been doing very well financially, even building a beautiful summer house on the lakefront in Michigan, which the family was not able to keep for long (Bradbury 2008). After he was effectively banned from national broadcast, he was able to get some work on the airwaves singing radio ads, where his anonymity allowed him to be hired—Ted Johnson recalls to this day the jingle for Maurice Lenell cookies, as sung by Win (Johnson interview 2005). This advertising work, along with concerts, church performances, a few records for children, and his reduced compensation for the now-local “Animal Playtime” show, was how he was making his living. Stracke, of course, already had a family to support and was probably at least as
concerned as Hamilton about securing a more reliable income. His desire for the School to be “permanent” may even have been partly inspired by personal needs. Stracke was also getting older, which further limited his career options, and was turning his thoughts towards his legacy and what mattered most to him.

He was at a point in his life where he needed to do something else besides performing, because he was getting older. [pause] He also had a mission for Chicago. He really felt identified with the Chicago community. And he had a mission for the city to try to bring it together. And I think this was one of the ways he wanted to express it[….] As a performer he had kind of made his mark in Chicago, and I didn’t think he felt that he wanted to go much further—I don’t think he wanted to go to New York or to Hollywood or any other place and become a quote-unquote “show-business performer.”[….] But I think he felt, at this point, he was getting older, and he would like something a little more substantial or concrete that he could be associated with that would keep him in town, and keep him working, in terms of prestige. I think the school did help him get some gigs. I think. [….] But I think that’s where he was, in his state, he wanted something solid behind him. (Hamilton interview 2006)

Although it later became a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization, the Old Town School was originally established as a for-profit enterprise in which Stracke held the majority share. The preorganization agreement states that Win Stracke, Frank Hamilton and Gertrude Soltker “desire to organize a corporation to conduct the business of a music school, for which fixed and working capital will be required” (emphasis mine) with financial backing to be furnished by Stracke. While it certainly was not designed to line Stracke’s pockets with wealth—and it did not—nor was it founded on such idealistic foundations as to deny the practical need to pay the bills and support the teachers. In his own account of how he arrived at the idea for the Old Town School, Stracke does make clear some of his practical motivations—altruistically based, but with no interest in simple charity.

There was no doubt in my mind about the need and demand for good teaching in the skills necessary for the enjoyment of folk music. Hundreds of requests for me to teach adults and children had proven that. But, I felt that to command the respect of a class, a teacher must be a successful and active performer. I knew
from a lifetime in music that when a singer took on a full schedule of teaching individual students, he usually stopped being a successful singer. The demands of teaching a full schedule are simply too enervating to allow for the necessary energy and enthusiasm of public performance. So, if a workable class method of teaching could be devised, it would follow that a fine performer could teach three or four classes a week, make a sizeable income in terms of time spent, and still have enough time and energy to follow his career. (Stracke 1967, 2)

Solid business design is not generally a highlighted feature of folk revival narratives, yet that pragmatic outlook is one of the key factors that kept the School a sustainable enterprise.

There can be little question, however, that the most powerful force driving the creation of the Old Town School was a love of sharing music with others. Need of money alone would have driven its founders in more lucrative directions. Instead, they pulled together a motley group of interested amateurs (in the best sense of the word) in an old building, with the intent of building something “permanent.”
During the Old Town School’s first few years, Win Stracke and Frank Hamilton developed the basic philosophy and pedagogical structures that would define the School’s approach, and the growing community around the School collectively shaped its social and musical values, drawing a muted legacy of the Popular Front Folksong Movement into the concerns and desires of a post-war generation. They aspired to “a musical democracy,” in Hamilton’s words, and to an urban approximation of an idealized “folk-based community,” where an understanding and revitalization of America’s musical roots could form a defense against the influence of commercialism and the sharing of songs could show the way to bridge national and ethnic differences. “We saw what the school could become and what we wanted it to become: intercultural, diverse, but at the same time with a reverence for the folk cultures, folk-culture-based music, the egalitarian approach towards a social teaching, where people could find it as a social communication as well as a musical communication” (Hamilton interview, 2006).

The Old Town School got off to an auspicious start, acquiring first students, then new faculty within a few months, and generated a mild notoriety. As early as February 22, 1958, The Chicago Daily News ran a short story on page thirteen announcing, “Chicago Now Capital Of Folk-Singing Cult,” with a subtitle reading, “Even Has a School.” The suspicion suggested by such phrasing is leavened by its humorous and ironic, albeit rather condescending tone. The piece reports that after only three months, the Old Town School had 160 regular students (“local
yokels”), with about 200 more showing up for informal “sings,” and situates this success within a “fantastic surge of interest in folk singing in Chicago” (Henahan 1958).

Over the next decade, the School would grow and thrive, putting into practice its understanding of folk music as a social enterprise through a wide variety of intra- and inter-community activities, both organized and spontaneous. Frank Hamilton, Dawn Greening and Win Stracke left, one by one, and as the Folk Boom ebbed and splintered, the School gradually fell out of step with the times. From 1969 until 1982, the Old Town School was under the leadership of Ray Tate, at first navigating the dissipation of the Folk Boom successfully: OTSFM remained north Chicago’s go-to source for guitar instruction, continued to support a small yet energetic social scene of the acoustically inclined and enhanced its role as a hub for professional performers. But it did not weather the changing musical and economic landscapes of the 1970s and by the early 1980s was near financial collapse.

**Teaching and Learning**

The foundation of the Old Town School, the nexus and nursery of its musical life, was and is teaching and learning. Its founders believed that the music they called “folk music” was both the most accessible music for ordinary people to enjoy (because of its perceived simplicity and its vernacular content) and, partly for that reason, a field of musical knowledge that deserved more attention. Through long conversations and direct experimentation, Frank Hamilton and Win Stracke managed to synthesize a philosophy and a method from this premise that made social music-making a reality for its students, inspired by and feeding into the growing popularity of the folk music scene and, eventually, market.
Fundamentally, they saw themselves as providing an alternative to not only the commercial music disseminated by the radio and record industries, but also to the Western art music bias found in formal music education.

First of all, folk music came about as an anti-pop, corporate-corrupt music-business term. That’s what it was. You had the popular music of the day of the fifties and the forties, the corporate music business had reached a point of corruption not only in its economics and its interrelation of the people in the music business, but the output, the material that they were using. And people were reacting against it. They didn’t want it. They didn’t want media-driven music—they wanted to be able to do it yourself, make our own music, rather than rely on the media to tell us what was good or what wasn’t good, or to sing those songs. So that became a defining term: folk music. It was people’s music, it wasn’t media music, it wasn’t corporate music[...]

And again, it was also an anti-classical—quote-unquote “classical music” approach—it was a way to define what was the difference between classical music and folk music. It was a way of defining a different approach and a different type of music. (Hamilton interview 2006)

The basic components of the teaching method that Frank Hamilton improvised and Stracke helped refine were: the group lesson format, broken out by skill level; a priority on making simple music as soon as possible; the mutual importance of singing and instrumental playing; and the avoidance of standard musical notation.

Hamilton and Stracke were fortunate to establish a strong working relationship almost immediately. Their roles were complementary: “Well, Win was the administrator, and I was the educator. In common, we shared the vision” (Hamilton interview, 2006). In contemporary newspaper articles, Stracke’s title was given variously as Dean of the Old Town School of Folk Music and President of the Old Town Folk Lore Center, while Hamilton was referred to as “Co-Dean” or “Dean of Faculty.” Hamilton recalls, “Win never taught music. The whole time he was there at the school, I don’t remember him ever teaching anybody. He was an administrator, coordinator, program coordinator, a publicist, a figurehead for the school, and he never really got
his hands, uh, wet with getting into classes and teaching people to do anything” (ibid.). Ted Johnson, however, recalls Win Stracke teaching occasionally, and Stracke does list himself among the teaching staff from 1958 on, in “Biography of a Hunch” (1967).

He did help me, though, a lot. In terms of developing the pedagogical materials to be used. So from that standpoint, yeah, he was there…and at times he wasn’t there. At times he was off doing, you know, his career. But he was there enough so that he was really plugged in to every bit of what was happening in the School. He knew exactly what was going on and what people were doing. (Hamilton interview 2006)

Hamilton credits Stracke with an open mind. “Win was so wonderful. If I came up with an idea, he would run with it. I’d never had that happen before. I was really taken aback by it. ‘I wanna do this!’ ‘OK, let’s try it!’ And we would try it, and most of time it was successful, and sometimes it wasn’t, but most of the time it was” (Hamilton interview, 2005). They did, of course, have their differences and sometimes disagreed.

Now here’s what we didn’t have in common. I was an intuitive and I appeared very erratic. I mean, I think I might have driven people crazy. And it’s just because that’s the way I’ve always approached teaching. It’s always been like a director in a play, you know. You don’t really kind of know where everything’s going, you’re just trying things because you have a sort of an idea. The idea is to educate people, to get them interested and to see that they develop. And you just do this intuitively, you just try one thing, you try another thing.

Win was just the opposite. He was formal in his approach. He was a classical trained singer. I was coming from the jazz world, I mean I’ve played jazz and [been] jamming all my life. That jazz approach was actually diametrically opposed to Win’s approach. Win was less eclectic, and I was into everything. I wanted to know anything about any kind of music that came along down the pike. Win tended to have his own ideas of what he wanted personally for himself. And that was less eclectic, it was more formalized, and his approach to folk music was as a classical singer singing folksongs[….]

They were generally able to resolve any conflicts without difficulty because of their mutual respect.
Well, it was pretty easy because we respected the hell out of each other. I thought that Win was a very smart man—intelligent man, well read, politically astute—just every way, I had the greatest respect for him[....] And he was also, kind of kept me on focus. But there was always a little conflict there, because I would run here and I’d run there, I had an imagination that would run wild! Win had to tame that! So there was a definite conflict there. You know, couldn’t help it!

(Hamilton interview 2006)

*A musical democracy.* Democratic and egalitarian values were emphasized from the beginning at the Old Town School and expressed in the learning structures Hamilton and Stracke devised. The core principle of democracy is participation; so it was with music at OTSFM: “I like to call it a musical democracy, where everybody at their own level had a participation in it” (Hamilton interview 2005).

In order to be democratic, the music making environment had to be accessible. They felt that current models of music education were inherently exclusive, built on the principle that musical talent appears only in some individuals who should be mentored at the expense of the less talented. And like Bess Hawes, they were sensitive to the anxieties around music that many of those excluded and discouraged masses had developed. To open the doors and build confidence as quickly as possible, they foregrounded practical skills that would enable students to play a recognizable song immediately, in less than an hour on their first day, rather begin with scales and isolated theoretical concepts as more formal approaches generally would. In the Old Town School’s very first newsletter, written by George Armstrong in 1960, this priority is clearly laid out:

What are the purposes of the school? First, and most important, it is, to our knowledge the first school to offer courses in instrumental instruction specifically designed for people interested in folk music. After only two chord positions on the guitar have been learned, the student is shown that he is now able to play a simple accompaniment to a folk song. Thus the student, from the outset, can experience enjoyable results without the prerequisite of reading music and practicing scales and exercises appropriate to formal musical training.
Whether the student attends ten or a hundred sessions, something usable has been learned.” (Armstrong 1960, emphasis in the original)

Participation in musical activities was maximized by expanding the learning experience beyond the class hour. Hamilton recalls that they asked themselves, “What do we do in planning the program that we can not only bring in people to study the music, but have people who are the practitioners of the music be involved in the school as part of the educational process? So we devised the Second Half” (Hamilton interview 2005). Second Half took place in the evening following the “formal” instruction when all levels of students would convene and play together songs they had all learned, each using techniques suitable for their abilities. Students and all comers were also welcome to perform informally during this time as well, to share and teach each other songs, and thus had some of the characteristics of what would now be called an “open mic.” Second Half was thus based on practices developed in the group lessons at the Greening house, with an added presentational element, and clearly drew from the recent tradition of the hootenanny. It has remained the most unique and consistently practiced element of the Old Town School learning experience throughout its history, and was Hamilton’s idea originally: “I think it’s something I have to take credit for. I introduced it to Win and Win went with it. I’ll tell you why: because I was interested in being a performer, so figured if I’m interested in it, somebody else is gonna be interested in it, too. Win and I talked it over, and of course Win’s coming from a performing background. So he thought, yeah, that’s an excellent idea” (Hamilton interview 2005).

The School community also made sure that interpersonal relations reflected democratic values as well. The teacher was not meant to be an unchallenged authority; everyone potentially had something to bring to the table.
As an institution, we fostered an interactive environment, and what we attempted to do was to break down the teacher-student hierarchy and make it more of a participatory thing. Again, this goes back to the social aspect of teaching, which is I think a very Midwestern concept, the egalitarian again. In other words, the teacher is not the supreme authority[...]. It was more equality-based. (Hamilton interview, 2006)

Once there were other teachers on staff, Hamilton naturally extended this anti-hierarchical attitude to staff discussion as well. Armstrong reported, “At regular faculty meetings the staff, under Frank Hamilton, probes into problems to improve the group method of teaching, and discusses the progress of students who may have a special problem. The administrative staff implements all decisions of the faculty” (Armstrong 1960).

The folk-based community. Frank Hamilton retrospectively observed that the School founders’ ideals for how music should be learned corresponded to their understanding of how it was transmitted among people they considered to be “folk.” “I think subconsciously […] we were trying to recreate the learning that one would have in a folk-based community” (Hamilton interview 2006). Folk music enthusiasts of the time were well acquainted with the prevailing academic definitions of folk music, which rested primarily on the music’s origin in a particular kind of idealized social context—typically rural, non-literate (musically at least), and unaffected by commercial pressures or professional training, where music would be an organic part of the cultural whole of the community. Although there is no reason, anthropologically speaking, to assume that such a society or community would be organized democratically, the political values that this same cohort embraced led them to conflate this ideal folk community with the pursuit of a “musical democracy.”

They wanted the learning to come as un-self-consciously, or “naturally,” as possible, with knowledge transmitted through the social environment as much as or more than through an abstracted syllabus. “I think we attempted to teach by osmosis, and demonstration, as much as
we did by lecturing or by presenting a series of pedagogical materials” (Hamilton interview 2006). Everything about how education and music-making were presented and experienced at the Old Town School emphasized informal social interaction.

[I]t was very much like being on the front porch, you know, and it didn’t have that feeling of formality about it. Even though we did have classrooms, things were happening. In a way, that’s my teaching style, I just made things happen. I didn’t try to pin people down to a textbook or a classroom approach. I’d say, “Hey, let’s try this, and you over here, well let’s try this, and let’s see what happens when we put these two things together.” Or “let’s go this way, or go that way.” (Hamilton interview, 2006).

In order to bring urbanites into an appreciation of traditional music and into the circle of their own quasi-“folk community,” however, students needed to learn some social history, too. Since the music they were learning was, by and large, not organically part of the rest of their lives and customs, this knowledge did sometimes need to be abstracted and explained.

The other aspect of it was that folk music became enlarged in terms of our definition because it involved specific folk cultures where these songs emanated from. In other words, you couldn’t take a song, a folksong, without learning about the culture and where it came from, and why it became a song, that was sung in that particular culture. (Hamilton interview 2006)

This was another way that OTSFM set itself apart from more conventional music schools, and apparently challenged students’ expectations on occasion. George Armstrong addressed this in another of his newsletters:

It has been brought to your editor’s attention that there is, in the minds of some of the students, a misapprehension about the purpose of the School. They suppose that the sole function is to teach guitar and banjo technique and that any class time that is not devoted to showing them where to put their fingers is a waste and they are not getting their money’s worth. They should be reminded that the name of this school is THE OLD TOWN SCHOOL OF FOLK MUSIC. It is necessary to learn something about folksongs—how they should be sung, their meaning, and the country or culture of their origin. It makes little sense to only learn chord formations and playing techniques, without understanding how to apply this instrumental knowledge intelligently to each particular folksong. The purpose of the SCHOOL is not just to turn out instrumental technicians, but to give each
student at least a glimpse of the richness of our heritage of oral tradition. 
(Armstrong 1961a, emphasis in original)

Of course, the folk ideal was not attainable, or even wholly desirable under the circumstances. When asked in 2005 to reflect on inherent contradictions, Hamilton observed,

[T]he contradiction is that there was somewhat of a formalized approach. We did have some pedagogy and we did have some notation that was used which would not have been used in a folk culture. If you were in the Mississippi Delta and you were studying blues guitar with a master, they wouldn’t show you how to annotate so you could take it home and practice it. You’d have to be around that person. Also, we were copying the folk community rather than being an essential ethnic part of it. Because nobody from Chicago really grew up in a monolithic folk community. (Hamilton interview 2006)

Practically speaking, the schedules of the industrialized world had to be accommodated for working adults to participate, and a literate student body would feel more comfortable and learn more efficiently if some information were given on paper, or at least in writing on the chalkboard.

_A musical U.N._ To Hamilton and Stracke, a musical democracy would necessarily require an appreciation for and engagement with cultural diversity. “[W]e saw folk music as being ‘the commons’; it was for everybody. And we talked about how we could make inroads into ethnic communities and bring people in” (Hamilton interview 2005). According to Hamilton, in their discussions of what the Old Town School ought to be, he and Stracke had “kind of grandiose ideas” of its ultimate potential as “a miniature musical United Nations. Where you had people from all walks of life coming in to study American folk music. And not just American folk music—all kinds of folk music” (Hamilton interview, 2005).

Stracke’s war experience had given him the opportunity to encounter unfamiliar music traditions and to engage in musical exchanges as a means of communication and goodwill,
something that clearly would have appealed to his already established values regarding peace and co-operation of different peoples. Hamilton elaborates,

[The musical U.N. concept] was important to me—I can’t speak for Win exactly, but I’m pretty sure we shared the same vision—for me, it was a method of understanding, and communication, and bridging gaps that divide people. It was an attempt to harmonize the world community, in the big picture. I’ve always done that—I’ve always been interested in other cultures and the way other people live and wanting to communicate with them. And so it was an attempt at world communication. And I see it as kind of, again, going back to the U.N. model, an idea to be able to understand and communicate and negotiate, reciprocate, and learn. The idea being ultimately a kind of musical way of defining international harmony. (Hamilton interview, 2006)

This optimism was in line with the climate of the post-war years, when a new spirit of internationalism ignited, as the United Nations was established, and as young GIs came home with new knowledge of the world. With the end of colonialism, the rise of the United States as a superpower, and the start of the Cold War (not to mention the rather hot one in Korea), Americans were seeing the world, and their place in it, in new ways. Christina Klein (2003) argues that there were two competing (but not mutually exclusive) conceptions of the U.S.’s new role and the way forward in the Cold War: the global imaginary of containment, and the global imaginary of integration. The former, of course, was concerned with blocking the spread of Communism, while the latter, she argues, emerged from the cultural and institutional work of the Popular Front—and Henry Wallace’s 1948 presidential campaign in particular—and stressed the importance of reaching out to the rest of the world and forging affective bonds with other peoples, finding in them more similarities than differences. James Michener’s novels (e.g., Sayonara [1954] and Hawaii [1959]) and Rogers and Hammerstein’s musicals South Pacific and The King and I—all huge hits at the time—exemplify popular expressions of this outlook in literature and entertainment; Eisenhower’s People-to-People exchange programs with the Soviet Union and the beginning of overseas adoption programs were social examples (Klein 2003).
At the Old Town School, this work was done through the inclusion of international and
(to use an anachronistic term) multiethnic folk songs—that is, music that was identified with a
specific non-Anglo national or ethnic identity and that could be taught to assimilated Americans
with minimal challenge. In this, they were perhaps following the lead of, and in any case,
clearly in the same frame of mind as Pete Seeger and his idealistic vision of “one world.”
Seeger, as Benjamin Filene points out, was deliberately attempting to broaden the canon of
folksong in his recordings and performances of the period by including songs such as
“Weimoweh/The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” and “Cielito Lindo.” “To include a South African and a
Mexican song in a collection of ‘American favorite ballads’ is a suggestive move[….] He was
eager for Americans to recognize the compatibility of all the world’s musical genres and the
possibility of uniting them into a single tradition” (Filene 2000, 192). Of course he was far from
the only leader in the folk revival to become interested in music cultures around the world, and
the folk revival was to become a fertile ground for budding ethnomusicologists, but “Seeger took
the notion of mixing and matching traditions to an extreme” (Filene 2000, 193).

Hamilton, too, released an album of international songs with Valucha DeCastro, a
Brazilian-born student and teacher at the Old Town School, entitled *The World of Frank and
Valucha* (1962). Hamilton and DeCastro recorded fourteen songs from eight different countries
for the album (France, Israel, United States, Brazil, Yugoslavia, Chile and Greece), clearly
aiming for as much cultural diversity as they could manage, though Asia and Africa are not
represented. Each song is sung as a duet—DeCastro’s full alto and Hamilton’s clear tenor are a
complementary pair—and most are accompanied by Hamilton’s versatile guitar playing,
supported and occasionally supplanted by banjo, harmonica, string bass, accordion and/or subtle
percussion. The arrangements, both vocal and instrumental, are interesting and inventive, while
remaining faithful to the aesthetic of their sources, which would have been folkloric recordings intended for cosmopolitan audiences. The technical quality of the performances and production is high.

Hamilton and DeCastro’s respect for cultural difference shows in the close attention they paid to stylistic and linguistic detail, even as the overall message intended is one of world unity. Their pronunciation and inflection in the eight different languages sounds impressively accurate, while Hamilton demonstrates considerable range in idiomatic expression in several different guitar styles. DeCastro and to a lesser extent Hamilton vary their vocal style to suit the tradition, as well. She darkens and fattens her voice for the Yugoslavian song, for example, in a close approximation of a typical Bosnian vocal timbre, but finds a higher, harsher and more nasal sound for the tongue-twisting Brazilian song “Bambuele.” Both evoke the flat, forceful sound of shape-note singers of the Southern U.S. in their a capella arrangement of “Motherless Child.” Though he is no less capable a singer, Hamilton is not as able to alter his vocal timbre. His high, strong voice retains a quavery vibrato on sustained notes, and always sounds like the voice of a white American, somewhat reminiscent of Pete Seeger’s singing. Overall, the album speaks to the musicians’ high standards both of musical professionalism and cross-cultural aesthetic sensitivity, as well as to their idealistic notions of human universals.

While on the one hand, this integrationist perspective on the world involved constructive engagements that certainly did broaden minds and connect people across their differences, on the other hand, it also embraced a certain idealism and naïveté to the persistent social inequalities embedded in these differences. A domestic example of this naïveté comes to hand in comments by Win Stracke to Chicago Tribune columnist Terry Galanoy in the late 1960s. By this time a more cynical social analysis of power relations was current, and Galanoy posed a hypothetical
debate between Stracke and Julius Lester, author of the “mind-searing” new book *Search for the New Land*, in which Lester had written, “I was intimidated and confused as I heard them (white!) singing about God’s Gonna Trouble the Water and their Trouble in Mind and they bobbed their heads and bounced up and down in what I presume they considered rhythm. What did they know of these songs we would sing in church and the field […]? Nobody had ever hated them” (Lester 1969, 56).¹ Stracke’s response was surprisingly insensitive to Lester’s discomfort, and to the very concept of cultural ownership:

> The answers to Mr. Lester’s statements are blowing in the wind. Blowing in the wind. Here [at the Old Town School] we teach guitar and we teach banjo certainly, but most importantly, we teach the simple and exalted joy of the music that comes from the hills and valleys, the meadows and the mills, the fields and the hearts of people everywhere. Folk music doesn’t belong to black folks or white folks or blue folks, it belongs to people[….] Certainly “John Henry” is about a Negro, but it is a ballad about one man for all men. And all men singing about that man may get a little understanding of him and his people and his troubles. (Galanoy 1969)

During Frank Hamilton’s years at the School, at least, the commitment to integration and pluralism was actively pursued in various ways. “We emphasized folk cultures, with an “s,” plural, rather than a homogeneous community[… . W]e’re learning songs from Israel, we’re learning songs from Serbia, we’re learning songs from the blues trading—Maxwell Street—it’s all different communities, and we’re learning it in the [folk] way, by bringing in the people, by having them be part of the learning process” (Hamilton interview 2006). As the lead teacher, he of course had a significant influence on what music flowed through the School, making sure that as broad a range of music was taught as could be managed, though it seems this generally needed

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¹ *Search for the New Land: History as Subjective Experience* (1969) is an autobiographical discourse in prose and found poetry on a young black man’s encounters with the political upheavals of the 1960s.
to be pinned to a core Anglo repertory in the classes themselves, responding to students’ primary interests and teachers’ knowledge.

Less structured events like Second Half were more amenable to including diverse offerings than classes, since guests could be brought in to introduce new kinds of music. Dance was another means of introducing into the School community. “At that time, my brother-in-law, wonderful guy by the name of Nate Lofton, my ex-wife’s brother, taught folk dance there. We would bring people in and he would teach folk dances around what people were playing” (Hamilton interview 2005). “International Folk Dance,” as it was generally called by its participants, was a particularly long-lived and resilient activity among folk music enthusiasts at the Old Town School as elsewhere in the U.S., for decades to follow. Since social dances require neither the use of a foreign language nor skills on unfamiliar instruments, they have tended to appear more accessible to curious Americans. In Hamilton’s time, the Old Town School had occasion to draw in musicians from various traditions through the dance classes. For example, “Milija Spasojevic the button accordion player from Yugoslavia, well known in his own country and just as well known in his own Serbian community in Chicago, came in and played for folk dancers” (ibid.).

Concerts were probably the easiest way to bring new sounds into the School (then as now). George Armstrong, reflecting in the fall of 1960 on the previous year, recalled an African performance as particularly memorable: “One of the most unusual and outstanding programs of the past year was given by the Ducorians, three Librarian students studying in Chicago, who performed traditional music and dances of their country. They appeared replete with drums, bells, thumb pianos, rattles, leopard skins and masks.” (Armstrong 1960). The Ducorians were also mentioned in the September 1961 newsletter as having performed again that year.
Armstrong incidentally credits a member of the Ducorians, Van Richards, with bringing the song “Kumbaya” to the U.S.). Armstrong reports in his December 1961 newsletter visits by the Romero family from Malaga, Spain (flamenco artists); Milija and Nada Spasojevic, a Yugoslavian couple who sing the folk music of their country with accordion and tambourine (“Nada is now taking guitar lessons at the school”), alongside the likes of Frank Profitt and Peggy Seeger.

Hamilton has frequently recounted the following anecdotes, with varying levels of detail:

Like the medical doctor who came in one night and had lived in Africa and learned mbira, the thumb piano. And he got up and he did a whole five-minute story-song that he had learned from somebody in Africa. We had a Japanese airline hostess give an impromptu lecture on classical Japanese music. She came in because she wanted to learn the guitar—she knew this was an open area where people were interested in music. People from other countries and other cultures did come in there because they knew they would be accepted and they knew that they wanted to learn something about American culture as well. So it was kind of a cross-pollination. There was an elderly Jewish man from Eastern Europe who’d learned to play the mandolin, and he sat down and sang some Jewish songs. That really blew me away. (Hamilton interview, 2005)

In fact, Hamilton used the examples the missionary doctor and the Japanese stewardess to illustrate the vibrant exchange of musical cultures the Old Town School again in our second interview a few months later, as well as in a reminiscence published in the 1991 collection of essays on the folk revival, Wasn’t That A Time. In the latter, he writes, “We had a missionary doctor who had lived in Africa who played the mbira, an African thumb piano. He retold a story he learned from one of the tribe’s people while he was there. A Japanese airline hostess gave us a succinct lecture on Japanese music. A European Jewish man played a mandolin and sang songs with the students” (Hamilton 1991).
Hamilton also has recalled—again, on multiple occasions—excursions that he and Ted Johnson made into the ethnic communities of Chicago, particularly those of southeastern Europe, proactively seeking out diversity.

Ted and I decided we really needed this ethnic input in the School. We went out exploring Chicago. We went over to the Halsted area and sat in with the Greek bands—some of the people just coming off the boat from Athens, and played in those 9/8, 7/8, syrto, kalamatianos. We would go to the Serbian community and find out what’s happening there and what people are doing. We got lectured about “Don’t change our music and don’t capitalize on it!” No, no, we just wanted to hear it—we were really interested, you know? And the same guy would say to his friend, “Now you can’t trust Tvarich over there because he’s got a Bulgarian head!” I’ll never forget that! So that’ll give you an idea of what Chicago was like in those days. It was the melting pot that didn’t melt. So as a result, Ted and I were having a wonderful time with this, and we did begin to bring people into the School who could do it. (Hamilton interview 2005)

Hamilton was using the term “ethnic” in the usual colloquial sense to describe cultural difference based in a specific national ancestry (e.g., Greeks would typically be thought of as ethnically distinct, while white Americans from the Southern Appalachians would not). Significantly, “ethnic” in this usage tends to denote groups outside of the white, assimilated middle class perceived to be “mainstream,” having supposedly lost ties to any inherited tradition.

It is somewhat curious that Hamilton consistently tells the same small handful of international stories again and again. Is this simply a matter of rehearsed memories on his part, or were these in fact choice instances of relatively rare occurrences, that he draws upon to support the idea retrospectively that the Old Town School was genuinely reaching beyond its core constituency? While it may be a little of both, there is certainly evidence of cultural diversity present at the School in the early 1960s, as we have seen from Armstrong’s reports—more than the specific examples Hamilton recalls.

Practical approaches. The Old Town School’s group teaching approach had practical benefits in addition to philosophical ones. Ted Johnson outlined these for me in a conversation
about teaching in the 1950s (though his perspective could not fail to be inflected by the
subsequent decades he taught there).

There are aspects of musicianship that come from a group, number one. By
definition, that’s good. It’s better to learn to play with other people sometimes
than just to play by yourself, because it’s a group activity anyway, often.
Secondly, you can watch. Somebody’s correcting this person, and you’re picking
it up. You’re learning from what the instructor’s telling somebody else. A sense
of comfort, a third thing is, that maybe you feel less uncomfortable in a group
setting as a student than a private lesson. All these things just tended to make it
useful. In fact, it’s affordable. It’s social. It works pedagogically. I just think
it’s a natural setup for this kind of music. (Johnson interview 2005)

Arguments along these lines were given to me by teachers frequently during my research, no
matter which period in the School’s history they happened to be talking about.

Ted Johnson offered some specific examples of how a student would be started on the
guitar at the Old Town School.

I’ve always thought that [these teaching techniques] are in distinction to, in
contrast to the more conventional way music instruction was going. Not that I’m
an expert in that, but even if you were taking lessons at the music store or
somewhere else, they’d give you notes to read, and they’d say, “Now this is the E
string, now E, F#, now play a little scale, start very systematically”—which
makes a lot of sense, traditionally, with learning an instrument—but not in terms
of picking up a folk instrument. It’s just the opposite way most of us picked it up,
and the way I did: somebody says, “Now you can put your fingers here”—maybe
you’ve never played a guitar before—“but put your fingers here, now move that
finger.” Now, with this hand start going oom-plah, oom-plah. Now get a rhythm
going—strum, strum—maybe only one chord. While the student’s doing that,
you start singing a song that actually goes with that one chord. And suddenly, in
the first ten minutes, he’s accompanying a song. And I’ve seen so many times the
light break on their faces: “I’m playing music!” Rather than weeks and weeks of
careful, analytical, traditional approach. That’s the sort of approach [Frank
Hamilton] was using, and it works so well! It was successful. (Johnson interview
2005)

For the School’s first few months, Frank Hamilton was the only teacher, and at first,
guitar was the only instrument taught; the outline of each teaching night was basically the same.

For the first half of each evening class students focused on various skills appropriate to their
level, with Hamilton darting from group to group, some of which would be in separate rooms—

“I would have a class in one room, another class in another room, another class…and it got to be a little crazy!” (Hamilton interview 2005). Although he had to handle the classes single-handedly, Hamilton was able to sort the students by level, according to the guitar skills the student was interested in and able to handle—basic chords, bar chords, finger-picking, etc. By his own account, he was not one to prepare lesson plans. He would engage enough forethought to have printed handouts on hand, providing song lyrics or strumming patterns, but took an intuitive, improvisational approach in general.

My approach […] was to work out problems on the spot[….] I would look at the situation, a room full of people, and pretty quickly try to assess where they were in their educational development in music, and I would teach to that. I would see if somebody over here was fumbling around with some basic chords, I would say, “Well, why don’t you just try and do these two chords and go back and forth on these two chords, and we’ll play a song that does that.” And I’d say to this person over here, “You’ve had a little more experience, why don’t you play a little run that will fit.” And we’ll go back and forth on those two songs [chords?], and we’ll either make up a song, or we’ll sing something out of the songbook, something that involves two or three chords, and learn to play it together. (Hamilton interview 2005)

Second Half would convene after a coffee break, and Hamilton would lead it in a similarly responsive manner. When the different classes assembled to play together, the lowest level students would simply strum the basic chords, while more advanced students would add bass lines, finger picking patterns, fills, and so on. He recalled:

Someone will say, “Well, I’d like to learn some bar chords.” Ok, we’ll try a bar chord. You’ll play the bar chords and so we’ll get a spread in the guitar sound, because this person is playing the basic chords down at the nut on the guitar and you’ll play the bar chords up on the fourth, fifth fret, the bar chords that go along with it. And then somebody else would maybe say, “Well, I’d like to play a bass run.” And we’d work on bass runs. And so we’d try to integrate the various components of musical ensemble playing: bass line, harmonic line, melodic line, fills—learning how to do fills, learning how to tailor things so a vocal can be heard—using a vocal as the lead instrument, how to support lead instrument—either a voice or another instrument. (Hamilton interview 2005)
Although Hamilton’s approach was more instrumentally focused than Bess Hawes’, it was still more vocally based than instrumental instruction in a more formal context would likely have been. Hamilton explained,

I see the song as being the basis for the music. If you know the song, then you know the music. If you don’t know the song, then you don’t know the music—it’s hard to play without knowing the singing. So, yes, we worked on accompaniments a lot, and primarily accompaniments to begin with because it was what was accessible. People didn’t know how to play solo guitar. (Hamilton interview 2005)

Accompaniment was prioritized, then, partly because it was an easier starting point for a beginner; a player could strum along with a familiar song almost immediately, and would not need to play a melody line, much less carry a performance alone, until much later, if ever. At the same time, singing was viewed as important for its own sake.

Every musician needs to know how to sing—they don’t have to sing well, in terms of operatic training or vocal technique, but they do have to know how to sing, because but that’s what music is about, it’s about singing. Whether you’re playing an instrumental solo, you’re singing through that playing. The concept of singing is so personal, and it’s so involving in terms of what music is, the expression of music, that yes, music was extremely important to us. (Hamilton interview 2005)

As Hawes had found in California, singing did not necessarily come easily or naturally to middle-class, urban folk (and, in my observation, this does not seem to have changed much a half century later). I asked Hamilton about the attitudes of his Old Town School students.

TL: Were people there to learn to sing, or was it kind of hard to convince them to sing? How did people feel about singing?

FH: Very reticent at first, but the wonderful thing about the guitar is you could hide behind it. You could just play the chords and you could kind of mumble along. And that was fine. That was acceptable. And eventually you got a little more confidence. And when everyone was singing, so why not sing? So it was kind of like, “Everybody’s doing it, so I can do it, too.” But yes, people were very shy about singing. (Hamilton interview 2005)
Singing, then, provided protection for unconfident strummers and the guitar provided protection for unconfident singers, and this worked was because in a group setting, the two would compensate for one another.

Anxiety over formal musical training on the part of students led Stracke and Hamilton to eschew musical staff notation, perceiving it to be one of the barriers to access. “So we went out of our way studiously to avoid notes and note-reading” (Hamilton interview 2005).

So Win and I would talk about, what ways can we take the music and make it accessible to people? What’s the most convenient way to do that? So we started notational systems, tablature systems. I developed a tablature system, just in working with people, so that they didn’t have to read music. Because I knew they’d have a phobia about it[….] Pete Seeger quotes an old-timer, “Hell, there ain’t no notes to the banjo, you just pick it!” That’s kind of what our approach was. We didn’t want any of this baggage by the academic community to enter into it. (ibid.)

Rather than insist that students learn strictly by ear, however, Hamilton provided a visual analysis of guitar technique through an unorthodox tablature method he developed. The advantage of this system over other kinds of tablature was that it gave very precise direction for fingerpicking arrangements. Each finger on the right hand was assigned a number: T (thumb), 1 (forefinger), 2 (middle finger) and 3 (ring finger). Plucking the sixth string with the thumb would be written: T(6). A complete pattern specifying which finger was to play which string could thus be written out very concisely. Left hand fingerings might be indicated only by the letter name of the chord, or by a graphic representation of the fingerboard (as in standard guitar tablature). Rhythm was indicated with the stems, flags and bars borrowed from staff notation—these could be written above the fingerings and chord names. For simple strumming patterns, chord names and rhythm notation would suffice. The transcriptions of this system that I have seen also include staff notation, with the tablature written beneath it, but this is a redundancy,
helpful to those who can read it but unnecessary to those who cannot (see example 4.1).

Hamilton no longer feels this special system was necessary, however.

In retrospect, I think I probably would have changed that if I had it to do over again because I don’t think reading music is rocket science, anybody can learn to read music. Shape-note hymn singers up in the Appalachians can do it. Anybody can do it. They did it—and they didn’t do it in an academic way, they had shape notes, a shape represented a tone. That’s a good way to do it, too. There’s different ways of reading music. (Hamilton interview 2005)

Expanding the ranks. For the first three years, guitar classes were offered on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 8:00 to 10:30, with a class for young people and adults together on Saturday afternoons, from 1:30 to 4:00; in 1961, Monday evenings were added (Stracke 1967, 3;

Example 4.1: “Come All Ye Fair and Tender Ladies.” Sample of tablature system developed by Frank Hamilton in late 1950s for use at the Old Town School; staff notation duplicates the tablature. OTSFMR-RC.
Armstrong December 1961). Within the first few months, Nate Lofton began teaching his Folk Dance Circle every Wednesday night, and would continue to do so into the 1970s (Stracke 1967, 6). Thursdays became banjo night; John Carbo, the first banjo teacher, was hired in 1959, and a 1963-64 brochure for the Old Town School indicated that by then six of its sixteen teachers were teaching banjo, the rest guitar (Armstrong 1961; Grayson 1992, 14). Other instruments may have been offered intermittently, however, as the newsletter reported in September 1960 that a class in the recorder, “the ancient English flute,” would be taught that fall, and, at the end of 1961, that a Wednesday night class in vocal technique would be added, “designed to help would-be singers to do what they would like to do with their voices, no matter what style of folk music they may choose to sing” (Armstrong December 1961).

In addition to these weekly classes, the School had began offering special workshops by the mid-1960s; in 1965, these included beginning mandolin (Ray Tate), beginning bagpipe (George Armstrong), plectrum banjo (John Carbo), guitar and song styling and arranging (Jo Mapes), blues guitar (Stu Ramsay), and classical guitar (Jim Norris). In addition, Lofton’s Wednesday night Folk Dance Circle was joined that year by a madrigal gathering—similarly casual, participants could join for one dollar, paid each evening attended (OTSFM 1965).

The second teacher to join the Old Town School faculty after Frank Hamilton was Ted Johnson, hired in 1958. He took part in Frank Hamilton’s first classes in Dawn Greening’s living room and is still active at the School today. All together, Ted Johnson estimates that he taught at the Old Town School for forty years “off and on,” making him without a doubt the School’s longest serving faculty member; factoring in his involvement as student, performer, and general community member, I have not met anyone else with a longer, more consistent commitment to the School. When I first ran into him in 2005 on an ordinary weekday evening
at the School, he was arriving for his fiddle lesson; inspired by his grandson, who had recently started studying violin, Johnson was learning to play the fiddle for the first time so that the two could share the experience. Thereafter, I frequently encountered Ted and his wife Marcia casually in classes (the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble), musical get-togethers (such as the Grafton Pub Folk Club), workshops (Sacred Harp shape-note singing), and other events, formal and informal. Unless otherwise noted, Johnson’s biographical information below is drawn from our interview in February of 2005.

Ted Johnson was born in 1928, six years before Frank Hamilton, and grew up in Evanston, Illinois. Although parts of his early childhood were spent in California, and in his adult life he taught for many years in East Lansing, Michigan, he has always been fundamentally a Chicagoan, with his family, musical and social life oriented to the city. Like many Old Town School community members I interviewed, Ted Johnson finds his background unremarkable:

Everybody likes to say middle class, but how else to describe it? Irish-Catholic family background, went to Evanston High School, went to college[.....] My father was a civil engineer. I seem to have in my family background artists, priests and engineers[.....] My mother was an active woman and got involved in the production of radio, talk shows that Northwestern University put on. And she was a bit of a poet too, a writer.

Johnsons’ family had originally come from New York and New England; his maternal grandfather had moved out to Chicago and became vice president of the People’s Gas Company. Johnsons recalls that his family voted Democrat. “Thinking back on it, I know their views were liberal, as mine are, maybe not as much as mine are. It wasn’t a subject of constant preoccupation. But I would say left rather than right.”

When asked about music in the home, Johnson described his family first as “listeners.” “Music was part of our lives in the sense that we’d listen to it—we had classical music on and so on. Probably inasmuch as we had any kind of music on the radio, it was classical—I can’t
remember what kind of pop music we were listening to. It wasn’t a real big deal.” (Johnson 2005) Johnson’s own musical tastes, while never rejecting his family’s classical preferences, branched off in early childhood in the 1930s, when he started listening to WLS radio: “They had the National Barn Dance in those days […] nobody else I knew was listening to that kind of music, but it appealed to me […] When I was really little, I remember hearing these things. I really liked it.” In fact, listening was not at all the only musical activity in the Johnson household. “My father had kind of a natural talent. [My parents] both sang, didn’t play instruments. My father had had some musical instruction as a kid. My brother, however, was very serious about the flute. He was a musician, and at one time had to decide whether to go into electrical engineering or go on with the flute, and he chose the engineering.” Ted had piano lessons growing up, though he did not mention this in response to my initial question about music in the home, and when I specifically asked, “Did you sing?”, he replied, “Well, yeah, I mean, I’m in a family where people sing.” For a family of listeners, it seems the Johnsons actually made quite a lot of musical noise!

And certainly, there was music at school. “I went to Evanston [Township] High School and I sometimes think that was a tremendously good influence, because they had, at that time anyway, a great music department, and I was in all the chorus, different choral things going on[…] That must have helped my musical development. And we sang in Gilbert and Sullivan and operettas and lots of choral stuff.” In college at Loyola University, Ted’s choral activities were less formal and more self-directed and socially oriented. “I was on the college newspaper there, and a group of us, a little clique of us started just singing and became a little musical group and used to sing Gershwin things around[…] There were about four of us, and we had these arrangements of show tunes and we’d sing at hospitals and things. That was another nice
musical experience.” And of course there was church. Even though Ted does not consider himself particularly religious, he has often made use of the musical opportunities in churches, figuring when he was younger that if he had to go to church (“my family will probably look askance if I don’t go to church”), he might as well be in choir.

Then I got into the Bach choir of Evanston later. So I’ve done a lot of choir singing at different times in my life, and even now, I’m doing it again, just because I love that kind of—there’s a Lutheran church around the corner and I’m singing in there, matter of fact I have to go tonight, it’s Ash Wednesday. Just because the music is so exquisite that we do. We did a Bach cantata not so long ago. Very good director. So that’s another whole side of my musical life, is choirs.

Johnson’s own career has always been oriented toward writing, language and literature. After college, he spent a couple of years in Europe, “backpacking and stuff,” and then took a job as a staff writer on his return, “because I have a kind of talent in that direction.” Eventually, he earned a doctorate in English at Northwestern University2.

Probably all that came out of my experience at the Old Town School. In fact, it changed my life in a way because I was in a different profession. I was…rolling around various things. I had a job at Northwestern University, public relations writing, it wasn’t a career that was really going anywhere much. Then I started this Old Town School teaching and I thought, “Gee, teaching. That’s nice. I should go back to school.” So then I decided I’d become a teacher[….] So the Old Town School affected me that way, got me into teaching.” (Johnson interview 2005)

Music was always present, however. “Sometimes I think…if I’d gone into a musical career, that might have suited me more naturally in terms of my talents, except that I’m not an organized, systematic musicians—maybe I could have been if I’d studied it. But I’m kind of a casual improviser, intuitive musician. So, maybe it’s best as an avocation, rather than a profession.”

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2 Johnson ended up choosing a music-oriented topic for his dissertation, one suggested to him by folklorist Archie Green, though a textual analysis rather than a musical one: Black Images in American Popular Song, 1840-1910 (English, Northwestern University, 1975).
It was a girlfriend who first gave Ted a guitar, a few years before the Old Town School opened.

When I took piano lessons as a kid, I spent all the time, instead of practicing like I should, I just improvised. So, the guitar—the idea of strumming a guitar was attractive. This girl gave me her old guitar and I dug up an odd book, a Burl Ives songbook, it had the chords—E chord, A chord. So I started picking it up out of the book, just strumming on my own. And, uh, there must have been other people around. You know, it wasn’t that odd of a thing to do. But I guess I’d sit on the back porch strumming, singing songs that I knew already, and those are the chords—hey! You can do it! Just a I, IV and V chord. So I was doing that sort of on my own. And then things were starting to ferment a little in the city—as I say, the Gate of Horn opened, and folk music was starting to be in the air, and U. of C. was already active there, although I wasn’t involved with those people. So I was doing it on my own for fun, and maybe sometimes with friends.

TL: Were you listening to recordings?

TJ: Sure, yeah, sure. Pete Seeger stuff, Burl Ives, Richard Dyer Bennett, Josh White, these people were beginning to be heard. So here was something I could do, even without bothering to learn to read music! And my ear tells me if the chord is right or wrong, which of course again is the secret, is the good thing about this. So then when things started happening at the Gate of Horn, these open mics and things and Sunday sings at the Gate of Horn and amateur stuff, I’d meet other people and you know and then the whole Old Town School thing started happening. But before that, I was doing it just for fun.

Johnson began taking classes with Hamilton back in the Greening’s living room, and signed up for classes at the new Old Town School right away. “Then after a few weeks or a month or two, it looked like they could use more teachers, and they took me on. I was their first additional teacher, as a sort of apprentice teacher, and I started teaching using [Hamilton’s] methods.” When Hamilton and Stracke realized they needed to hire a new teacher, as Hamilton recalls, “Of course, Ted Johnson was the immediate candidate. He was articulate, he was bright, he was clear, he was able to do things with the students—you saw them progress, you saw them grow. So you knew immediately Ted was just number one, A-number one” (Hamilton interview 2005). Johnson started out teaching the beginning level, but soon branched out a little.
“Actually, I probably spent more time teaching Guitar 2 and Guitar 3 over the years. I’m not a real fancy picker, you know.”

Ted Johnson taught at the School for eight years without interruption, until he left Chicago in the fall of 1965 to join the faculty of the English Department at Michigan State University (OTSFM 1965). Johnson never really quit the Old Town School, however.

I taught every year for about thirty years or so—sometimes it became only in the summers since I was teaching at Michigan State, but I would come in, in the summers, so I could say I taught that year, too. Sometimes I would teach another class or fill in for somebody. But I think I taught regularly, maybe with an interruption, for about forty years, maybe with a year or two that I wasn’t teaching.

Most of those years, Johnson taught guitar—at Loyola University as well as at OTSFM. In his later years, he branched out, however, which brought him a brief moment of national fame.

TJ: And the last things I’ve taught there were yodeling—I’ve taught yodeling there several times.

TL: And where did you learn yodeling?

TJ: Skiing, and from my brother. It was just something I picked up. And at some point, this was about five or six years ago, somebody at the School suggested I teach a yodeling class, and I did. I got on “Wild Chicago”—I had my fifteen minutes of fame there, because somebody picked it up, the papers picked it up, there was a Tribune article about my yodeling and the yodeling class. And I was interviewed on various radio stations and my proudest one—though of course I’ve never heard it because they had a pledge drive in Chicago that weekend—was on the Saturday morning NPR news show, a little feature there. The national one. (Johnson interview, 2005; Simon 1998)

Another early hire at the Old Town School was Fleming Brown (1926-1984), who taught banjo there for many years. Brown was no newcomer to Chicago’s folk revival scene and it seems likely he would have been one of the first people to come to mind when Stracke and Hamilton decided to add banjo instruction; George Armstrong praised him at the time as “one of the country’s outstanding folk singers, banjoists, and an authority on traditional banjo styles”
(Armstrong 1960). His personality and orientation towards folk music provides an illustrative contrast with Johnson’s. The following biographical information is mostly taken from an interview with Brown by Fred Holstein and Emily Friedman in February of 1975 and published in two parts that spring in the Old Town School’s folk music magazine I Come For To Sing.

Fleming Brown was born in Marshall, Missouri, in 1926, making him older than both Johnson and Hamilton. His family moved to Glen Ellyn, Illinois, a Chicago suburb some twenty miles west of the city, when he was about nine years old, but he would always retain a South Midland twang in his speech (OTSFM 1962). By his own account, his family and the neighborhood he grew up in were middle class and he lacked for nothing he needed. A child of the Swing Era, he did not grow up with any exposure to traditional or what would then have been classified as hillbilly music, but “had grown up on a combination of Hal Kemp and Stan Kent. Nobody had played guitars where I lived[….] No one in my family played music.” Near the end of World War II, he joined the Navy, where he encountered a new kind of music. “There were a lot of Southern boys with guitars. They were always clannish, and they’d sit around on two or three bunks and play some pretty good music[….] These boys played guitar, and I was always hanging around—I just loved to listen to them” (Holstein and Friedman 1975a).

Like so many of his generation, he was introduced to the banjo by Pete Seeger, first by recordings and Seeger’s People’s Songs publication, How to Play the Five-String Banjo, and then in person at a political rally in 1948.

You know, when he started to play that long-necked banjo, it’s like a rainbow comes across your eyes…. It just knocked me out[….] After the concert, I went up and talked to Pete and asked if he knew anyone in town who could teach me how to play. And he said, “There is a fellow that plays banjo here, named Doc Hopkins. He’s on WLS radio.” So I called Hopkins. And he said, “Sure! I can’t teach you, but I can show you”—which I think is the only thing you can do in teaching a folk instrument in person. (Holstein and Friedman 1975a, emphasis in the original)
He apparently started performing soon afterwards. “When I first started performing, things were very simple. The quality of performance that was accepted in those days was pretty low. Many of the accepted performers then couldn’t get up on a hoot stage today” (Holstein and Friedman 1975a). But Brown worked hard.

And honest to God, it became a dedication of sorts[....] I would work, and work, and work. I worked roadhouses in Missouri and Arkansas. Now this wasn’t traveling like Woody Guthrie did. I always had $150 in my pocket. I wasn’t dependent on it. But I’d go into a roadhouse and I’d say, “Mind if I sing here?” And they’d say, “Fine.” [....] And I’d do it. I’d sing for six hours. And if they wanted to hear “John Henry” fourteen times, I’d sing “John Henry” fourteen times[....] I’m not trying to romanticize this; it’s not all that romantic. It was a thing I could afford to do[....] I wanted to do it. To see if it would work. But I always had a way back, a way out. (ibid., emphasis in the original)

It is interesting that Fleming Brown (by the 1970s at least) had a clear sense of his own class privilege, and the nature of his choice to pursue the music of another social class. “For me, it was a way of finding myself[....] I was never up against it, like the creators of the music we interpret were. I was never really down and out, except by my own choosing.” In this interview, he was clearly defining his dedicated pursuit of music as an avocation, as Ted Johnson did—neither a profession, nor something that sprang naturally from his roots. “I wanted to be an independently wealthy folksinger. I didn’t want to depend on it. I wasn’t going to get into the ‘business’ of being a folksinger.” In this, however, he did not feel he was acting contrary to the spirit of folk music: “Folk music, as such, was and is recorded and played by people who were and are miners, farmers, lumberjacks, sharecroppers[....]” (Holstein and Friedman 1975a).

Fleming Brown had been connected to the folk music world of Chicago since the late 1940s and was an early co-host of Mike Nichols’ folk music radio show “The Midnight Special.” He replaced Win Stracke in “I Come For To Sing,” no longer a touring show but a regular act at the Blue Note jazz club (Holstein and Friedman 1975b). When the show finally ended in 1959,
he joined the Old Town School. As a teacher there, Fleming Brown went his own way, not completely on board with Frank Hamilton’s social style of teaching. According to Steve Wade, a student of Brown’s and himself now an expert on traditional banjo:

There was no frilliness in Fleming Brown’s classroom. There was a chalkboard, about a dozen wooden chairs, and maybe one music stand. If there were shades on the windows, they were rolled up tight and the bright sodium vapor lights from the street shone in[….] Then, we each had to take a turn and play what we had worked on since the previous Thursday. No hiding in groups, we played solo for our teacher and our classmates[….] Another thing, we never got to join in on the Second Half—no milk and cookies for us. Finally, Fleming would play his banjo and sing for us. It was like being on the edge of the world and someone was taking us by the scruff of the neck. “Listen to this,” he’d say. “Isn’t this a jewel?” (Steve Wade, quoted in Grayson 1992)

Hamilton apparently did not take it personally, open-minded as always.

Now, Fleming was an iconoclast forever—he didn’t want anybody showing him how to teach. He wanted to do his thing, and we said, that’s fine—’cause he was a great performer. And he really knew the old-time style banjo playing, he had studied it, he’d really lived it. In fact, he would never like his students to come to Second Half, he’d always keep them over so he could show them something he wanted to show them. Which was fine, that’s all right. And at the same time, we were also interested in doing what Fleming was doing all the time—bringing in the traditional aspects. (Hamilton interview 2005)

The ranks of Old Town School teachers expanded rapidly, with Jack Tangerman and John Carbo also hired in 1959. By the summer of 1960, Liz Dickenson, Beverly Pincus (“who started as a beginning student at the school, has become a skilled instrumentalist and teacher”), Nathan Lofton and Ramon Cordova had joined the teaching staff, as George Armstrong reports in his newsletter of that August (Armstrong 1960). George Armstrong does not mention his own function in the community, though Stracke lists him as having joined the faculty in 1962.

Ray Tate. When Frank Hamilton left in 1962, he was replaced as Dean of Faculty by Ray Tate, a skilled guitarist who had only recently developed an interest in the folk music phenomenon; after Win Stracke retired in 1969, Tate took over as executive director as well.
The following biographical details are drawn mostly from two interviews with Ray Tate: one he gave to Emily Friedman in 1976, published in two parts in *Come for to Sing*, and one with several OTSFM staff members, videotaped in 2002. Tate grew up in Kentucky and picked up the guitar at the age of five, when he heard the brother of a friend play. “That was it, right there—I had to have one. Immediately.” Unlike his colleagues from the Chicago suburbs, Tate was surrounded by country music as a child, with the sounds of the Carter Family and Bill Monroe in his ears. He learned to play by listening to and watching others and, when he was older, by copying recordings. “I started copying every solo off records—whatever records I could get[…] Hank Williams, Carl Smith—anything with guitar on it.” He practiced these obsessively as a young teenager, almost to the exclusion of any other kind of playing—“all I could play was licks!” By middle school, he was playing gigs with a group and soon branched out from country, becoming interested in jazz and the music of Les Paul and Elvis Presley. (Friedman 1976a).

Ray Tate majored in biological science in college, with a minor in music. After a couple years in the Marine Corps, he returned for graduate school and earned a master’s degree in parasitology of fish. Only then did the burgeoning folk scene catch his attention. “By now I’d heard Bob Gibson and the Kingston Trio and I thought, ‘Boy, playing this stuff is like falling off a log!’” He moved to Chicago, and after a few gigs with a folk group called the Wayfarers, got a job around 1962 as a house musician at a bar, backing anyone who performed there (Friedman 1976a).

It was John Carbo brought Tate to the School to teach.

When John took me up to the School the first time—I’ll never forget it. It was kind of a dark, dingy building, and I was kind of skeptical about the whole thing at that point[…] I remember thinking to myself “Jesus, they don’t even have music stands!” I came from a college music background—if you were going to
practice, you had a music stand. And students at the School put their music on chairs[...]. Dawn showed us this room, a large room, where about twenty-five or thirty people were all singing and playing—the Second Half had started. And I thought, “Gee, that’s really neat, even if they haven’t got any music stands!” (Friedman 1976a)

He started by teaching a Guitar 2 class, and soon put together a bluegrass group there called the Urban Renewal Boys—a new sound for the Old Town School, which was still “strictly into Leadbelly and traditional folk accompaniments.” “And there I was, back with the old music—it was a reversion for me” (Friedman 1976a). After about a year, Tate realized he could make a living as a music teacher and committed to staying on; he taught there for twenty years. In the earlier interview, he seems satisfied with his choice not to pursue a performing career or another line of work: “I never starved. I always made a living, playing my music. And I wanted to make a living here, being a part of the community and developing myself as a person” (Friedman 1976b). Years later, however, after his separation from the Old Town School and departure from Chicago were old memories, Tate spoke a little less favorably about the working conditions at the School. Even as director, in the 1970s, he had worked only part time and made only three or four hundred dollars a week—not enough to support his family—so he supplemented it with a second, full-time career in the recording business as a studio musician and arranger, doing music for “commercials, films, industrial shows” (Tate 2002).

Tate is fondly remembered as a teacher. He admitted to too much cockiness at first—“I was a terrible teacher for a while. I was a real hot dog[...]. I think part of the cockiness was insecurity. But I mellowed out and became a little less conservatory-minded.” In outlining his philosophy to Friedman, he prioritized music as an expression of the individual musician’s life and experience, the importance of teaching to good musicianship (“you must teach”), and the importance of performing, however informally: “It makes you analyze yourself and your work
more. Also, it gives you an idea of what people are looking for in music, an idea of what you can put into the music and give to them” (Friedman 1976b).

One of Tate’s major responsibilities was of course to manage the curriculum, making changes influenced by his own history and commitment to technical excellence in playing. “I looked at the lesson plan at the School and thought it was just a little too fast. I thought we should stretch the program out about 100 percent, which we have done, while still keeping the philosophy that the School is a place for amateur players who want to learn to accompany themselves. Now, however, they have the chance to become virtuosos—if they want. They can specialize” (Friedman 1976b). In the 1960s, the guitar curriculum had been divided into three levels: Beginning, Intermediate and Advanced Beginning; under Tate, it was expanded to five levels: Beginning, Advanced Beginning, Intermediate, “then Advanced that wasn’t too advanced, for those who couldn’t, and then Advanced for those who could. And they’d weed themselves out” (Tate 2002). Jimmy Tomasello, who began taking lessons at the Old Town School in 1972 as a senior in high school and is now Guitar Program Manager, remembers Intermediate as a huge Thursday night class, sometimes enrolling as many as sixty students at once.

JT: They would have most of the second floor of 909 [Armitage], was the intermediate class, that Bill Hansen taught[….] He would be up with a microphone up at the front of the class and then [the assistants] would pass the things out and go around the room and help people with their fingerings[….]

TL: So, people just kept taking that class? Over and over, until they—

JT: Yeah. Until they could go into Ray Tate's advanced class, which is where I got to eventually. Yeah[…. V]ery different from how it is now, you know.
(Tomasello interview 2005a)

There is a sense that the School was more oriented towards supporting and even producing professional musicians than it might have been at other times, though Tate still stuck to the bottom line: “The whole idea was to make it fun! Make it an enjoyable experience” (Tate
2002). He placed more emphasis on professional qualifications—formal music and teacher training—in hiring teachers: “Many of them have degrees in music now, and some experience in or a degree in teaching. I think there’s more knowledge of music and theory at the School now” (Friedman 1976b). Tate was proud of the way they were able to serve as a resource for both amateur and working musicians.

We were smaller. We had a lot more personal contact with students. Especially those who really got involved with the place. And we changed a lot of lives. A lot of lives. Personally, I changed a lot. Helped people along the way, into being professionals. And helped a lot of people develop a lot of relationships. And we could see that, because we were small. We acted as kind of a musical clearinghouse for people who came to town, who wanted to work—where can I get a job? Where can I meet so-and-so? Do you know so-and-so? How can I find him? Can I teach here? I’m from New York, or I’m from Texas? I know so-and-so, would you like to get him up here? That kind of thing went on. A lot of what they call today networking, though the word wasn’t used then. (Tate 2002)

An Integrated Folk Music Life

The second purpose of the School that George Armstrong listed in his September 1960 newsletter, after accessibly useful music instruction, was “to provide a place where folk music can be enjoyed in a community—a social atmosphere” (Armstrong 1960). The following year, he elaborated a bit on this point: “It has been said before, but it is worth saying again that it is the essential purpose of the school to encourage the use and enjoyment of all the folk arts in a social situation, rather than to prepare entertainers for work in show business” (Armstrong December 1961). He further explained that folk music should be integrated with other folk arts and social life generally, citing plans “that increased emphasis can be placed on such aspects of folklore as tale-telling, play party games, and unaccompanied singing in the form of canons, rounds and shape-note hymns”—all activities, musical or otherwise, which don’t merely emphasize but depend on and consist of social interaction. “To this end a series of informal
social ‘gather-alls’ are in the planning for the coming year. They will be designed to include the whole family and will seek to broaden the view of folklore than is usually associated with the urban hootenanny’” (Armstrong 1960). This holistic approach supported and was supported by the creation of a cohesive Old Town School community. Ted Johnson explained,

I think the word “community” has always been a sort of a key concept at the School, from the very beginning. I suppose folk music by definition is communal[…] The fact that music works better in groups. So you’re always coming back to this sense of, we’re doing this together. The fact that it’s group lessons. There’s not a lot of people off in cubicles studying their individual scales. Which is great if you want to become a great player. It isn’t that. It’s almost communitarian by nature, it seems to me. (Johnson interview 2005)

Student body. Although the Old Town School emerged from a specific, existing network of Chicago folk music lovers that coalesced in local folk music clubs, and continued to depend on this cohort for the bulk of its support as it expanded throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, the School’s appeal was not necessarily limited to that mostly white, middle class and educated demographic, nor to one generation. I have been unable to find any demographic survey of students from the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s accurately accounting for students by race, ethnicity, income, occupation or age, however; we are left with the claims of OTSF community members, colorful characterizations by mainstream newspaper reporters, and photographs as evidence for the student body’s diversity (or lack thereof).

Photographs from those decades do consistently show a mix of genders among students, apparently fairly balanced; the students seem to be mostly but not exclusively young adults. In the first decade or so, some racial diversity is present, with a small minority of black students, and the occasional individual who could be Hispanic or Asian. The professionally photographed, glossy 8x10s that remain in the OTSF Resource Center were presumably made with promotional intent, however, so cannot be considered objective evidence.

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When Win Stracke described the student body in his 1967 “Biography of a Hunch” pamphlet, he clearly took pride in what he saw as an unlikely mix.

The composition of the student body has always provided an interesting chemistry to the classes. Among our students you will find: office workers, engineers, psychiatrists, high school and college students, housewives, elementary, high school and college teachers, artists, priests and Protestant clergyman, nuns. We have salesmen, doctors, lawyers, social workers, firemen, photographers, a great number of advertising men, and recently several professional hockey players and their wives. (Stracke 1967, 3)

Ten years along, this portrait of Old Town School students was well rehearsed. In nearly every news article about the School in its first decade, a similar description is given. A flippant piece in the Chicago Daily Tribune Sunday Magazine, which describes the School as “probably the strangest educational establishment extant,” observing that “the craze for folk music has suddenly afflicted millions of otherwise sane people and sent guitar prices skyrocketing,” profiles the student body as follows:

Its students have all the outward manifestations of normal citizens. They include doctors, lawyers, stock brokers, bankers, teachers, research chemists, geographers, stenographers, housewives, and whole families who share a common addiction that drives them all the way in from Evanston, Oak Park, Deerfield, and Blue Island just to plunk and sing. (Browning 1958)

While this author’s aim was to contrast the students’ apparently conventional, middle-class professions with their offbeat pursuits, other reporters sought to emphasize the diversity of the student body—highlighting gender and age rather than income level or race, however.

There are more teenage boys than girl students in classes studying guitar, banjo, mandolin, etc. But 75 per cent of enrollment is young adults, fledgling professionals, teachers, lawyers, nurses, secretaries, junior executives. There is also an increase in students aged 60 or over, men and women facing retirement who are preparing creative outlets for future leisure. (Odmark 1963).

“Musical U.N.” intentions notwithstanding, all indications are that the Old Town School community was primarily white and hailed mostly from the same general social class; aside from
a generally open-minded attitude, the organization did not seem to develop any strategies for increasing race or class diversity. For those less actively involved in promoting the School to the city at large, the relative homogeneity of the community was unselfconsciously apparent. “I didn’t think of them as much different, inasmuch as I thought about anything,” recalls Ted Johnson. “They didn’t tend to be…well, some people would come through that were a blue-collar background or something, but I didn’t feel any great difference or distinction. Maybe I was just oblivious!” (Johnson interview 2005). During the 1970s, diversity seems to have decreased further, as the School lost the internationalist emphasis Hamilton and Stracke had championed in the early days, supporting almost exclusively North American music.

Throughout the 1960s, there were generally a few hundred students enrolled at the Old Town School at any given time—an average weekly attendance of over 400 was reported in the fall of 1963, and in 1969, Dawn Greening reported that enrollment was at about 360 (Odmark 1963; Southwood 1969). These figures do not reflect an equally steady accrual of fresh blood though, of course—in the same 1969 newspaper article, Greening is quoted to remark, “but what is amazing is the number of people who have been away for a couple of years and then come back.”

Organized activities. As alluded to by Armstrong, above, the Old Town School organized a wide variety of social-musical activities to deepen students’ understanding of folk arts and involve them more in the School community. One of the most straightforward ways to do this was through a diverse presentation of performing artists. Performers in the Schools first ten years included Folk Boom stars (e.g., Pete Seeger, the Weavers, Ian and Sylvia, The Tarriers) Old Town School teachers (including Fleming Brown, Ginni Clemmens, Valucha DeCastro Buffington), artists of the Popular Front (Will Geer, Langston Hughes, Earl Robinson), local
performers in the folk scene (The George and Gerry Armstrong Family, Ella Jenkins),
performers from local ethnic communities (Nada and Milija Spasievich, Federico Camacho),
folklorists (A.L. Lloyd, Archie Green), future stars (Jim McGuinn—who became Roger
McGuinn of the Byrds), past recording artist of the hillbilly and race records, “rediscovered” by
revivalists (Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, Hobart Smith), performers representing other
countries (Hugh Masakela, Sam Akpabot and Nigerian Group), and movers and shakers of the
folk revival who were only starting on their life’s work (Guy Carawan, The New Lost City
Ramblers) (Stracke 1967, 3).

The Old Town Folklore Center, which Stracke opened next door to the School in March
of 1963, also supported these goals. It served as a repository for “the city’s largest collection of
folk records, music books and scholarly materials”—in particular a large collection of historic
banjos) (Odmark 1963). Open to the public, it eventually evolved into a music store selling
instruments and accessories as well as books and records. Although staffed by some of the same
people as the School, it was run as an independent entity.

The School also attempted to reach out to its neighborhood, most notably by participating
each year in “Las Posadas,” a traditional Mexican Christmas procession through Old Town
(which at the time was still heavily Latino), “replete with Holy Family, donkey, scores of guitars
and hundreds of singers” (Stracke 1967, 9). These were organized by Federico Camancho,
community leader and proprietor of Café Azteca, which often hosted Old Town School students
and teachers in the evenings after class. Begun in December of 1961 (Armstrong 1961b), this
annual tradition continued for many years, possibly until the Latino presence left the
neighborhood.
Once it was more established, the OTSFM community began to look outward, for ways to express a firm belief in the uplifting power of music participation through volunteer service. In 1964, Ted Johnson, Ray Tate, and Dawn Greening taught a series of Saturday morning classes and programs in the Uptown neighborhood, with the intent of encouraging the Southern whites there to perform their “native music”—suggesting echoes of the well-intentioned yet patronizing Appalachian settlement schools decades earlier (Stracke 1967, 7). In subsequent years, the Old Town Singers, a group formed by some teachers and advanced students, began playing for patients in a long list of Chicago hospitals, with other performing groups to follow. Ray Tate seems to have been an organizing force in these efforts, and as he took leadership, more emphasis was placed on public service projects. “After all of these years, we are still constantly surprised to see what music and musical instrument training can do for people,” Tate told a Chicago Tribune columnist in 1969:

> Sometimes we get hard cases here. Rough youngsters off the streets who relate to nothing and who respect nothing. Within the first month we find they are developing a sense of belonging. They’re bellowing right along with the rest of the classes in our get-together group sings and their lessons[...] The five-string banjo takes the place of a five-shot revolver as something they want to own, something that will give them an identity[...] We try to make “Trouble in Mind” a song and not an attitude. (Ray Tate, quoted in Galanoy 1969)

In 1969, Win Stracke announced plans to set up a scholarship program called “Project: Upbeat” for a hundred inner city kids, of any race or neighborhood, to be selected by social agencies, presumably on the basis of need and interest. The scholarships funded instrument rental, text and a thirteen-week session of classes, and donations were sought from the public to support it, though it is not clear how successful the program was.

The nation’s bicentennial in 1976 inspired outreach efforts in a patriotic vein, including a lecture series on American folk music at nearby Mallinckrodt College and an Old Town School-
sponsored band to perform an Americana sampler around the city. The band, Ravenswood, gave Steve Levitt his first Chicago job after college. “Oh, it was [chuckles] otherworldly, in every way! There was auditions, there was a World War I medley[....] It was a little paramilitary sort of scene that this guy Julavera had in his brain, he had it all set up, and I was the antithesis of the whole thing. And yet we were together kind of well for a little while.” Having procured a grant to start a bicentennial folk music group, provided it was associated with a non-profit organization, the leader approached the OTSFM with the idea that they would benefit from the publicity. “So sort of a parasitic, a marriage of convenience. I don’t think the School had any intention of putting folk singing troupe together, didn’t seem that way to me” (Levitt interview 2005b).

That was a great group of musicians. We used to joke it was Frankenstein, ‘cause we were five people or however many people who never under normal circumstances would have formed together, we were not in the same circles, or musically connected at all. And yet, under that [unclear] an unheard-of sum of money—we were pulling $800 a month, that was [snaps fingers 4x] big-time! And it was good music, we played good music together! (Levitt interview 2005b)

The Old Town School also launched a project aimed at connecting with the folk music world more broadly. In 1975, OTSFM began to publish a quarterly journal on folk music, *Come for to Sing*, similar to the nationally distributed *Sing Out!* magazine in tone and topics covered, though more modest in scale. Produced by a staff of volunteers led by editor Emily Friedman, *Come for to Sing* was “by and for the folk music community of Chicago;” the quality of its interviews and practical advice was potentially of interest to folk aficionados anywhere, and eventually it was available at folk venues throughout the urban Midwest and beyond. Many of the folk musicians profiled and interviewed, not to mention many of the writers, were faculty, former students and/or frequent performers at the School, making the journal a rare opportunity for OTSFM to reach beyond the Chicago area. A typical issue included a feature interview with
a folk musician by Emily Friedman; several columns by prominent Chicago folk musicians, such as Art Thieme, Fred Holstein, and Ray Tate, which might cover practical advice for the folk musician starting out, a historical topic, or a some philosophical thoughts on the meaning of folk music; a listing of folk resources in the Midwest; letters from readers; and assorted traditional and contemporary songs in notation. *Come for to Sing* was published until 1985, but disassociated itself from the Old Town School in 1980.

*Informal socializing*. Social gatherings around music and other arts were improvised constantly, and most have probably escaped the historical record. These might occur in conjunction with one of the many visitors the School received, such as an April 23, 1961 “gather-all […] held for the folk dance group from the college at Berea, Kentucky[…]. They presented play-parties, Morris and sword dances” (Armstrong 1961a). The Greening home in Oak Park continued to host a steady stream of folk musicians traveling through town. “The Old Town School and Dawn, that nexus there, that was a hive of communal interest and activity for folkies in those days” (Johnson interview 2005).

Mainly, people made friends casually playing music and spending time together; Ted Johnson remembers it in the early years as “a social, cohesive group,” and the activities he remembers sharing were mostly impromptu.

Another big thing we did, you probably know, going after School to one of the clubs and singing and performing. It was at the Azteca…I forget the names of all the places we used to go to. So you’d be hanging out drinking beer and playing after class. That was part of the social life of the School, where you’d meet people and get to know people. It just naturally sort of happened. As you might expect in a situation like that. (Johnson interview 2005)

Romance often emerged from this milieu. Ted’s wife Marcia “used to say that the School’s responsible for a certain number of marriages and divorces, or ‘it’s the only singles bar with
strings” (ibid.; Marcia is also quoted in Grayson 1992, 11). Indeed, Ted and Marcia met through the Old Town School and they are still together today.

She came into my class. I was teaching maybe Guitar 3 or something, which we called it then. And I was teaching bar chords—you know what those are—and I said, “All right, to really learn them, let’s take a song like ‘Nobody Knows You When You’re Down And Out,’” and that’s one chord after another. “Do the whole thing in bar chords.” She took one look at that and left the class. Went into a different class. That was too much. Anyhow, that’s how I met her[...] I think the class I was teaching was too hard at that point. But that’s how we got to know each other. And we starting singing and playing together (ibid.)

The dissipation of the Folk Boom did nothing to diminish the vibrancy of the Old Town School social scene in the 1970s. All-night parties seem to be a particularly vivid memory from the period; soon there were about three a year, though they were “a lot of work” (Tate 2002).

We started those, I think it was George Washington’s birthday. What could we do that was different. A lot of professionals that I knew would come over and play, perform—in fact, sometimes too many. And you had to be very careful not to hurt feelings. We got a lot of beer, Vienna hot dogs, and let’s go! Charged a buck to get in, I think, twenty-five cents for a hot dog, a dollar for a beer. Beer was on ice in cans, you help yourself, put the money in the can yourself. Brought a lot of goodwill. (ibid.)

Jimmy Tomasello and Steve Levitt spent their youth in that social scene. After his first guitar lessons there in high school, Tomasello began volunteering at the front desk for Gayle Forsberg, the only other administrative staff person the School employed besides Tate in the early 1970s. “She was pretty much running the joint[...] There wasn’t too much to do ‘cause the School wasn’t too busy at all. Alphabetize cards. Play guitar.” Throughout college (Loyola University, then University of Illinois, Chicago), he worked part-time in the music store, becoming an assistant manager after graduation, at which point he moved into the apartment above the store with Steve Levitt; the two had gone to the same high school, though Levitt was older (see Chapter 9 for Levitt’s story).
The School became my life then, you know. It was pretty exciting. I remember Ray Tate was the director and kind of a, pretty much doing all the string sessions in town, from banjo and guitar, Mr. Chicago Recording Artist. He used to take me to sessions and stuff. And I just started meeting all these people, who I’d admired from afar, and now I was hanging out talking to Steve Goodman, John Prine was coming in and buying strings from me. I was just a starstruck kid, I was pretty impressed. (Tomasello interview 2005a)

Although both men actually played more rock than singer-songwriter music (or anything else that would typically be called “folk”) in their performing careers, this immersion in the social scene surrounding OTSF in their youth influenced their musical and social behaviors throughout their lives—that is, they internalized the Old Town School participatory ethos. As teachers, they now try to impart that ethos to younger generations.

The Folk Boom and Its Passing

It is obvious that the Old Town School’s early success and growth was largely due to the simultaneous emergence of the so-called “Folk Boom” in mainstream popular culture; Win Stracke’s “hunch” was accurate and timely. The Boom is generally considered to encompass the period from approximately 1958, when the Kingston Trio’s version of “Tom Dooley” topped the pop charts, to 1965, when Bob Dylan dramatically injected electric guitar into his Newport Folk Festival performance. But these well-known, landmark events were of course nothing more than particularly visible (or audible) symptoms of trends already well underway, and the choice of dates is rather arbitrary. It was in 1955, for example that the Weavers were reunited, post-blacklisting, a year that was already seeing a marked increase in guitar sales (Filene 2000, 205), and the Old Town School would not experience a decline in enrollments until after the end of the 1960s. To some participants and observers, then and now, this period was the “folk revival,” though it was in fact merely a crest of popular and commercial enthusiasm in a much longer
thread of American cultural history. As Neil Rosenberg observes, even the popular Boom did
not actually end, but was simply absorbed into the rest of popular music, providing an acoustic
aesthetic to draw from, a new mode of songwriting and a model for political consciousness
(Rosenberg 1993, 27).

What was distinctive about these seven years was the adoption, adaptation and
appropriation of the songs, aesthetic values, accoutrements, and to some extent, major figures of
the Popular Front folksong movement by the commercial entertainment industry. It was a boom
in the sense of a real estate boom, or oil boom, or even baby boom: a sudden and excessive swell
of production in the optimistic expectation of profit (or, in the case of babies, benefit, at least).
The irony of the commercial music industry promoting music grounded in a staunchly anti-
commercial ethos was a source of tension, anxiety and controversy among the stalwarts of the
folk revival. Archie Green, a folklorist, labor historian and university librarian, was faculty
advisor to the Campus Folksong Club at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, and
recalls the ten-year experience as “a decade-long seminar in definition: folk, lore, song, ballad,
text, tune, texture, style, code, community, survival, arrival, revival, authentic, ethnic, tradition.”
His students tended to employ religious rhetoric, he found, “in establishing dichotomies of purity
and pollution. We anguished over the roles of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, the Kingston Trio, the
New Christie Minstrels; we sought critical tools to demystify these cult figures” (Green 1993,
68).

Emerging primarily on college campuses, the Folk Boom could be considered one of the
first cultural movement of Richard Florida’s “creative class,” along with its contemporaneous
counterpart, the Beat Movement.

They were, in effect, an early wave of the 1960s counterculture, pushing against
what they perceived to be the empty homogeneity of their suburban backgrounds,
the hypocrisy of a government that saved the world for democracy and then launched the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the schizophrenia of a life filled with unprecedented abundance yet shadowed by fears of annihilation. For these young people, the possibility that Seeger held out of entering into the world of the folk appealed as a chance to build a richer, more morally grounded, more thoroughly integrated life. (Filene 2000, 204)

They were arguably among the first Americans able to parlay education and a passion for critical thinking into affluence, as an economic class. While this later wealth was a significant factor in the longevity of institutions such as the Old Town School, in the 1950s and 1960s it was their parents’ more industrially-based affluence that supported their musical explorations.

While many arrived at folk music through the efforts of Pete Seeger, Sing Out! magazine, and their ilk, many more first heard pop-folk hits on the radio by polished, commercial acts like Bob Gibson, the Rooftop Singers or the Kingston Trio, whose overall effect Time magazine described as a “slick combination of near-perfect close harmony and light blue humor” (July 11, 1960, quoted in Scully 2008, 39). Thought this aesthetic could not be further from the rough-edged pre-industrial authenticity idealized by the folk revival thus far, it still represented an alternative from current hits and drew fans in to more challenging music. In the late 1950s, Broadway show tunes by Rodgers and Hammerstein were topping the Billboard charts, with their lush, string-heavy orchestration, fronted by formally dressed and formally trained singers singing in a style if not strictly operatic, then certainly couched within the same general system of aesthetic values. Rock and roll offered one alternative to this professionalized polish, but still took a highly presentational approach, foregrounding showmanship, with participation limited to dancing, for the most part. Bebop and experimental jazz represented another countercultural possibility, the virtuosic soundtrack to the Beat movement contemporaneous with the rising Folk Boom, but its cool intellectualism was (intentionally) unappealing and even alienating to many; certainly, musical participation was out of the question for most people.
Folk music, on the other hand, was accessible and almost demanded a participatory approach. Its simple textures and unpolished, straightforward delivery contrasted sharply with the showy productions of the top hits of the 1950s. Acoustic guitar and banjo were its emblematic instruments—far easier to take up casually than classical, jazz or orchestral instruments, portable, and quietly unthreatening (unlike rock and roll’s electric sound). The attitude folksingers tried to project was casual, earnest, self-deprecating, and humble. The lyrics of the songs were also refreshingly different; they told stories about things that had happened—or were happening—to supposedly real people. Around the country, music clubs and schools sprang up to teach people to play and to provide a social environment for playing. The hootenanny—a casual, group singalong—became a pop culture phenomenon—“Hootenannies are the thing this year,” proclaimed Billboard Magazine in August 1963 (quoted in Cohen 2002, 212). ABC even ran a television show called Hootenanny from 1963 to 1964, essentially a folk-themed variety show, but the word was common enough by then that audiences could scarcely miss what a hootenanny was supposed to be. Although this folk music aesthetic was rooted in egalitarian political ideals and anti-commercialism, the stars of the Folk Boom employed it profitably.

I doubt that many performers, organizers, or audience members were simple-minded enough to think they were seeing and hearing folk music performed in an original context. But they were seeing and hearing folk music performed in a real context, a real community: that of the folk revival. Transitory as it may have been, the folk revival community was as real and as legitimate as any other based on shared interest and knowledge. (Jackson 1993, 81)

Participatory music making—if not always realized in presentational performance, always at least evoked—was at the heart of folk music’s appeal; what image is more iconic than the Freedom Singers, Pete Seeger, Theodore Bikel, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary singing “We Shall Overcome,” arms linked, at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival?
Robert Cantwell argues that the political disconnect between the Popular Front generation and the Folk Boom generation, brought about by the persecutions of the McCarthy period, allowed the younger group to discover folk music afresh, on their own; they did not necessarily see themselves as stepping into an ongoing cultural movement. “It was precisely this temporary obscurity, the effect of the association of folksong with the political left forged in the 1930s that opened the immense aural and written resources of folksong and folksinging to the young and made it, by virtue of their independent recovery of it in the postwar period, their own” (Cantwell 1993, 40). To Cantwell, his generation’s attraction to folk music was “more taste than ideology, more style than discourse, more interpersonal than historical […] —that the world had been gravely mismanaged by the parent generation,” rather than in a radical political agenda. It was “conservative, or more precisely, restorative, a kind of cultural patriotism dedicated to picking up the threads of a common legacy that the parent generation had either denied or forgotten to reweave into history” (ibid., 49-50). While Cantwell’s narrative presents a persuasive impression of the more personal aesthetic and moral journeys folk music in the 1960s began to inspire, he paradoxically sees his generation’s particular brand of youthful idealism both as exceptional and as only a dilution of that of the previous generation, and fails to deal effectively with how politics actually did intersect with folk music.

Certainly, folk music in the time of the Boom was not mobilized in the service of a political agenda to anywhere near the extent that it had been in the pre-McCarthy era. At the same time, however, it could not be completely divorced from that history; the older generation was still active—reactivated, in fact—and highly visible to the younger, still espousing political solidarity through collectively raising voices in song. By the same token, conservatives could not shake their association of guitars and idealists with Communism and their fear of it. Some of
this is evident in snarky quotations from Chicago newspapers quoted earlier in this chapter, but reactions could also be more defensive. Archie Green recalls the suspicion with which the campus authorities at the University of Illinois greeted the Campus Folksong Club’s activities: “It proved difficult to convince campus police that we could maintain order at events. Several heated disputes with deans took place before we persuaded the administration to remove armed police from our casual folksings” (Green 1993, 64).

In fact, the new generation did use folk music as a political tool in the 1950s and 1960s. Group singing became an essential ingredient in the marches and direct actions of the Civil Rights Movement, a synergy between the participatory singing common in African American churches and other social contexts on the one hand, and the more self-conscious embrace of group singing by young, white activists. As the anti-war movement began to grow in the mid-1960s, more folksingers began to write and sing topical songs (e.g., Buffy Ste. Marie’s “Universal Soldier” and Bob Dylan’s “With God On Our Side,” both 1964). At the same time, traditional source material was becoming less important as a marker of authenticity within the folk music scene. “What mattered now was the depth and quality of the artistry with which one expressed one’s individual viewpoint, political or otherwise” (Scully 2008, 41). The reference point for authenticity was shifting from the social to the personal and a new tension began to develop between between traditionalists and singer-songwriters.

**OTSFM Response to the Folk Boom.** The Old Town School leadership was quick to recognize that the commercial popularity of folk music, however odious to them in some respects, represented opportunity. Although intellectual debates such as the ones Green reports at the University of Illinois doubtless occurred at the Old Town School and the surrounding
scene, it was a less intellectual environment and the School aimed to cast a wider net. Win Stracke was quoted in a newspaper article entitled “Hootenannies Are Hot!” saying,

> I do see the hootenanny as a fad, mainly because of its superficial commercialism. But like fashions, there’s always a continuum of good that remains, fortunately, even tho [sic] a style may go out. And some good comes of it, too. Hootenannies will encourage more people to learn more about our great musical heritage. That’s why I have no great bitterness. We resent, of course, the people who play loosely with the lovely old songs. But we have no confidence that the music will survive.³ As Woody Guthrie said, “You can’t kill a good folk song” (Win Stracke, quoted in Odmark 1963)

Frank Hamilton, as usual, was a little more open to the new sounds than Stracke, and saw the same potential for good in the new music itself.

> I didn’t mind the music and I didn’t mind the Kingston Trio—I didn’t really think the Kingston Trio was all that great, I preferred the Weavers, because I know I had a bias there—but ...you know, I felt that way about Peter, Paul and Mary and all the other pop groups. I wasn’t head over heels with that stuff, but I enjoyed it, and I thought it was good, and I thought it did a lot of good for the country, in terms of breaking down the barriers of the corporate corrupt pop music industry. (Hamilton interview 2006)

They were happy to take advantage of the interest in guitar and banjo generated by the Folk Boom stars, and to welcome the newly curious and educate them on the musical roots of the recent hits, which provided the entry point, and draw them towards an older repertoire and a less consumerist mindset towards music.

> I had mixed feelings about [the commercialization of folk music]. In one way I had to use it. Because in those days, people wouldn’t just be interested in folk music they hadn’t heard. If they’d heard somebody sing it, or had happened to hear a song on the radio, that was their exposure to it. So that was what we had to use kind of as feeder material. So we did a lot of songs that were popular by the Weavers and later by the Kingston Trio and a lot of the groups—you know, “Tom Dooley” popped up a lot. And this was because it was a catalyst for bringing

³ This may be a misprint in the article, and should read “But we have no confidence that the [old] music will not survive”; or, by “the music,” Stracke may be referring the new body of work he finds superficial and therefore not durable. It is clear from context that he is, in fact, confident that the old songs will survive.
people into more in-depth understanding of folk music, in its traditional and cultural contexts. (Hamilton interview 2006)

Ray Tate, Hamilton’s and later Stracke’s successor, was still expressing a similar perspective to a newspaper reporter in 1969, years after the height of the Boom:

The school has always stressed its ties to traditional music, but as Ray Tate (who is dean of teaching) pointed out, “There is a lot of good music being written today that we like to teach.” They draw the line at Rock, however, although Tate admits he occasionally brings down an electric guitar to show students that “you don’t have to blast people out of the room to make it sound good.” (Southwood 1969)

At least once, the Old Town School sometimes addressed the topic of the Folk Boom directly, hosting a 1960 panel discussion on “The Great Urban Folk Revival,” which brought together Win Stracke, Richard Chase (a collector and story teller from North Carolina), Bob Cosbey and Jack Conroy (both folklorists), with Studs Terkel moderating (Armstrong 1960).

The depth and breadth of knowledge students brought with them when they first started at the School varied a great deal, depending on their backgrounds, but as the Folk Boom progressed into the early 1960s, they tended to arrive with certain expectations of what kind of songs they would learn, based on what they had heard on the radio. The teachers were generally willing to humor this expectation, but were always sure to teach some traditional material as well, along with a few local favorites, often supplied by Stracke; Hamilton was committed to bringing in songs from beyond the Anglo-American repertoire, as well.

TL: So what were some of the favorite songs?

FH: In those days, we did a lot of the basic songs: “Skip to My Lou,” “Go Tell Aunt Rhody.” And then we would branch out, we’d do something that was popular on the radio like “The Sloop John B.” And then we would do other songs that, oh, had more of a more country feel to them, maybe like “Going Down This Road Feeling Bad,” ‘cause people around there knew who Woody Guthrie was. So we might do a Woody song. And then we would branch out, and Win had a wonderful repertoire of songs, so he would teach some songs. And we’d learn things like “Methodist Pie,” and some of the wonderful songs he used to do. And then we’d begin bringing in the ethnic people and they started singing some
Spanish songs, some Israeli songs, if we could get them to sing some Serbian songs. We’d get people singing in languages, we’d try to do that. So the very first, though, was bare-bones simple, just to get people involved.

TL: And would those be songs that everyone would know?

FH: Yeah. Well, they would pretty much know them if they were around folk circles.

TL: But not necessarily otherwise?

FH: I don’t know really, in those days how many people had really listened to the words of “Skip to My Lou.” I mean that’s pretty esoteric stuff. It was accessible, and it was intriguing, people liked to learn it, regardless. (Hamilton interview 2005)

In the 1960s, the School seemed to be defending itself against the growing power of rock-n-roll by blocking it out, though the Folklore Center, as a music store, was perhaps more flexible. Steve Levitt, who took classes there as a thirteen-year-old in 1965, and returned in the 1970s as a young man, sees the tension in retrospect, but from his teenage perspective, there was no conflict between the two worlds.

I think the School was ignoring that whole issue, the invasion of country, and rock and roll, the folk community besieged[....] I don’t recall ever seeing an electric guitar in the classes when I was there, but the Folklore Center carried electric guitars. I bought a couple of guitars from the Folklore Center, [...] space-age sprockets and things on it, very cool. So the Folklore Center was...not as, not giving that message out at all, and I don’t know whether the School was or not, I actually wasn’t paying attention to that, you know. Wish I had, because it was a big issue going on right then, the Byrds were out, Sing Out! Magazine had pulled in the ranks, you know, the folk communities in conflict was raging. Didn’t notice it at all! Just sailed right through. I was obviously clear what my vote[?] was; I thought it was all folk music, obviously. So. So, I apparently didn’t see that there was any argument on the score at all, but there it was. When you’re thirteen, I think those currents just kind of go by you. (Levitt interview 2005c)

As the Folk Boom became history and the 1970s brought a wider field of popular music genres to choose from, the need for teachers to rely on popular songs instead of traditional songs as the entry point for students continued to increase.
As time went on, we changed the kinds of songs we were using—teachers started using Paxton, Ochs, Dylan, Seeger songs. We became more responsive to what the students wanted, what they were hearing in popular music. We still teach traditional music, of course, and always will; we don’t provide a steady diet of contemporary songs. But if a teacher wants to try something, we want to be open to that. We’re teaching “Rhinestone Cowboy” in Guitar 1; it’ll be a big success[....] The pop songs give students a shot in the arm—they identify with it. We’ll give them “Here Comes the Sun”—three chords! And they’ll say, “Hey, I can do that. It’s not that hard.” (Ray Tate, in Friedman 1976b)

At the same time, Tate attempted to maintain the commitment to a certain folk integrity, though the lines appeared to be blurring. A 1977 article in the Chicago Tribune reported,

[T]he school held steady through the Beatles, acid rock, and all the other trends and fads, and emerged strong with the “urban revival” of folk music and country crafts[....] “Because we do nothing gimmicky, schlocky, or trendy, answers Ray Tate, the school’s curly-haired, 39-year-old director. “We don’t advertise that we’re teaching the theme from ‘Rocky,’ like some other music schools.”

(Lauerman 1977)

Departures. Of the original founders, Gertrude Soltker was the first to leave. She took care of the bookkeeping for only the first couple of years; half-jokingly, half sincerely, Hamilton claims he was responsible for her departure. “My teaching style was rather intuitive and erratic, and our bookkeeper left because of me. She felt I was just too far-out. [laughs] She was actually kind of nonplussed because I didn’t do things according to Hoyle. And Gert was the kind of person who ran a tight ship, you know, with her bookkeeping” (Hamilton interview 2006).

Frank Hamilton led the teaching faculty at the Old Town School for five years. He continued to nurture his own aspirations as a performer, however, playing regularly at the Gate of Horn and releasing two record albums (The Folksinger’s Folksinger, 1961; The World of Frank and Valucha, 1962). When the call came from the Weavers, it was an opportunity he could not pass up. Pete Seeger had left the Weavers to pursue a solo career in 1958 after the Weavers had begun to stage a comeback from their blacklisting by playing the college circuit and riding the crest of the burgeoning Folk Boom. Seeger was replaced by Eric Darling; in
1962, Darling himself left to head The Rooftop Singers, who almost immediately scored a number-one hit with “Walk Right In,” leaving the Weavers once more in need of a banjo player. They chose Frank Hamilton, “that gifted young musician who almost single-handedly made sense out of the chaos of the Chicago folk scene,” as he was described in Sing Out! magazine (Silber 1963).

The Old Town School bid Hamilton a fond farewell and he relocated to New York City. Unfortunately, the chemistry was not there, and Hamilton was only able to stay with the Weavers for about year.

And that was about all I could handle, because I was raising a family, the work was not that plentiful (although we traveled first-cabin wherever we went places, we stayed in the best places). But it was hard, it was difficult. And it didn’t seem to set well[….] Nothing really overt, no real serious falling out or anything, it was a situation where it just seemed like it wasn’t quite happening[….] And this is understandable because, mind you, I was the second replacement. They were shattered when Pete quit. They grew up together: Pete, Freddie, Ronnie. They were in the labor struggle together, they were at Peekskill together—they had a history! And here’s Eric, now he has to leave, and here’s this new kid on the block. They don’t know anything about me. So, only the natural thing that they would, uh…. I always felt kind of like a second-class citizen there. But, they tried. They tried to make me feel good, make me feel comfortable[….]
Chemistry was good on stage. We put on some good shows. But the other parts didn’t work. (Hamilton interview 2005)

Unable to make ends meet as a performing musician, even as part of the Weavers (who, he pointed out to me, “were big in name, but they were also blacklisted,” and even in 1962, that still mattered), Hamilton was forced to put practical considerations first. “At the time, I was going through a terrible divorce, a bad, bad relationship. And I had kids to raise. And Bess invited me to come to California to teach classes at UCLA with her. So I jumped at that opportunity. Because I thought that California would be a better place to raise kids” (Hamilton interview 2005). He stayed in California for many years, where he taught guitar and banjo to a wide range of people (some of whom became quite successful in the music industry), finding this
to be the most practical way to support his family. By the 1990s, he was living in Atlanta and performing as a duo with his second wife Mary. Today, in an energetic semi-retirement, the two perform at retirement and nursing homes, using music of the past to help seniors reconnect their memories, among other musical and political projects.

Throughout the 1960s, Stracke continued his career as an advocate of traditional and historical music, though his focus shifted away from performance. In 1965, he and Norman Luboff published a handsome volume of folk songs, *Songs of Man*, clothbound and illustrated with full-color plates. He also presented a program for Illinois Day at the New York World’s Fair entitled “Songs Lincoln Loved,” featuring several Old Town School teachers (OTSFM 1965). He and Luboff were commissioned by the Illinois Historical Society to write a cantata for the state sesquicentennial in 1968, and Stracke was featured as a soloist in its debut in Springfield. He also recorded an album for teaching U.S. history through song (Stracke 1968-1972).

Stracke did not do much performing in the 1960s; according to a short review in the *Chicago Sun-Times* by Roger Ebert (who had been a member of Archie Green’s Campus Folksong Club at the University of Illinois a few years earlier), Stracke’s August 1969 performances at the Fifth Peg, across the street from the Old Town School, represented his first club date in twelve years, since the days of the Gate of Horn. Ebert’s review was enthusiastically favorable, noting Stracke’s delight in “the songs real people were singing while the respectable scholars blocked their ears” including “a selection of early singing sales pitches, collected from medicine shows”—the antecedent of his own singing commercials of the 1950s. Ebert praised him as “a local resource, solidly grounded in tradition, possessed of a healthy social conscience, Chicago’s resident minstrel” (Ebert 1969).
At the end of the 1960s, Win Stracke retired from the Old Town School and handed the reins to Ray Tate. Stracke soon left Chicago all together, moving first to Mexico, then to Fort Collins, Colorado (Butler 1982). But he continued to make appearances at the Old Town School on special occasions, such as anniversaries, and perhaps dropped by more frequently than that, though I have not found mention of casual encounters in the 1970s and 1980s. By the late 1980s, he was living in a retirement home in Evanston, Illinois, and passed away on June 29, 1991.

Dawn served as the School’s administrator until the summer of 1969. George Armstrong reported that she worked days, and described her function as “coordinates the problems of the school,” which perhaps left the solutions to sort themselves out (Armstrong 1960). Even after she retired she was probably still a presence and seems to have been known to people at the School in the 1970s, but left Chicago all together in 1980 to live near her grown children. She passed away in 1993 and Studs Terkel, Ella Jenkins, Art Thieme, Fred Holstein, Jim Hirsch, Norm Kantor, and others performed and/or spoke, all in warm, sentimental tones at the memorial concert the Old Town School hosted in her honor (OTSFM 1993).

Fracturing of the folk music scene. The Folk Boom was unquestionably over by the late 1960s, though not the broader folk revival. Major folk music institutions like the Newport Folk Festival and Boston’s Club 47 succumbed to the weight of the star system they had helped support; both “fell to before the onslaught of changing attitudes, the rise of the rock-and-roll star system, and an increasingly sophisticated ‘youth industry’ that marketed entertainment on a massive scale” (Scully 2008, 44). Smaller institutions like the Old Town School could survive, with missions more sustainable by the local folk music communities that continued to exist, once again outside of the limelight.
In Chicago as elsewhere, the folk revival fractured into specialized interest groups, what Rosenberg calls “named-systems revivals,” such as bluegrass, blues, old time, klezmer, Balkan, Dixieland jazz, and a wide variety of other ethnically and/or historically specific traditions. Rather than an ideal of human universals, these smaller groups committed to something more like cultural immersion, learning a specific tradition in some depth. On the one hand, this represented a new sophistication among revivalists, of respect for the diversity of human music; on the other, by the nature of their specialization, these groups lost impact and visibility in the city or country at large, and socially, developed strong tendencies towards cliquishness.

The Old Town School, still attempting to be as accessible as possible, found itself alienating some of these more purist elements. It was maintaining a steady stream of guitar students and remaining engaged in a local folk music scene heavily inclined toward the singer-songwriter model, while many of its young teachers had aspirations of successful recording careers, some in rock music. Although weekly international folkdancing continued into the 1970s, the School was no longer a suitable destination for those curious about music from beyond North America. For those stalwart traditionalists within the Anglo-American sphere—or “traddies,” as they called themselves—the Old Town School had effectively “sold out.” This was one reason that the Come for to Sing publication left the School in 1980, and editor Emily Friedman is one of several individuals who severed their ties with the School at that time and have never returned (telephone conversation with the author). “Because Emily Freedman, who was then a very big person in the folk scene, very headstrong, very powerful, good person, but very—she felt, as a lot of people outside the School do, the School is this big kind of corporate thing, even when it wasn’t anywhere nearly as corporate as it is now, it was regarded as big and powerful. These are kind of the ‘anti-power’ forces” (Landt interview 2005).
By the late 1970s, the Old Town School’s fortunes were falling. “It just seemed that the interest in folk music was really dwindling at that point. The folk clubs were very few. Quiet Night was out of business. Earl wasn’t doing that well. So that’s when I started putting more things like jazz guitar, blues guitar. And trying to—and more private instruction” (Tate 2002).

As early as 1977, money was becoming a serious issue. “Tuition is not enough to keep the school running in the black,” the Tribune reported, “even though the instructors’ salaries aren’t high. Other income comes from weekend concerts, special events, Sunday Sings (one a month at each location, usually for $1), donations, and a recently begun membership program.” (Lauerman 1977). Tate had already been falling in love with Texas, disappearing from Chicago for stretches of time. “And…then the writing was on the wall, we needed money. And I’m not a fundraiser. I’m a musician. And I couldn’t do that. It was time for me to go. I always had this philosophy when we were doing well: We live on what comes through the door. [dramatic pause] We don’t ask for money. And that’s out of the question these days. For any organization” (Tate 2002).
CHAPTER 5
FROM CRISIS TO CORPORATION:
THE HIRSCH YEARS, 1982-2000

By the early 1980s, due to a variety of factors, the Old Town School found itself on the brink of bankruptcy, and its story might have ended there. The Board’s hiring of young guitar teacher Jim Hirsch as executive director, however, more than reversed the institution’s fortunes; it built them. Between 1982 and 2000, the School’s student body nearly sextupled and its annual budget grew from $350,000 to $7 million—a twentyfold increase—a transition engineered by a new professional administrative staff that eventually occupied a cubicle-filled office suite in the new Lincoln Square building. This growth was advanced by a new conceptualization of students and audiences as “markets”; in other words, the School began conforming to the organizational models of corporate America. These markets, in turn, were inspired and motivated by a resurging interest in acoustic music in the late 1980s and early 1990s and a new enthusiasm for cross-cultural exchange, under the rubrics of “multi-culturalism” and “world music,” both of which the Old Town School leadership capitalized on quite deliberately. All three of these trends—corporatization, the aesthetic move away from the electronicized sounds of the 1980s, and the concern for cultural diversity—were influencing the whole of the cosmopolitan “Western” world at the time.

As in the 1950s, the Old Town School successfully tapped into the zeitgeist, in a new period of innovation, change and forward thinking. Confronted with a perception that both the folk revival and the very term “folk music” were obsolete, the organization made the bold decision to not only retain the word in its name, but to cast itself as the very embodiment of folk music in Chicago, which it then attempted to redefine through the musical activities the School
supported. Much of the institutional change was driven by the inspirations of key decision-makers in the management staff, whose personalities and interpersonal relationships were therefore significant; for the sake of my narrative, I will focus on the stories of executive director Jim Hirsch, program director Michael Miles and jane-of-all-trades administrator Elaine Moore.

This chapter follows the School’s improbable transformation from a small, scruffy non-profit on the verge of extinction, representing a splintered and diminished music community, into the largest non-profit folk arts organization in the country, catering to a market of mostly upwardly mobile young professionals seeking self-enrichment and self-expression opportunities. It became a nest of contradictions: a corporate folk revival; a profitable non-profit; a new Old Town School.

Rescuing the Old Town School

Although the Old Town School maintained a vibrant musical life during Ray Tate’s tenure, organizationally there were problems—significantly, a lack of long-range planning. “For years, Tate recalled, the school was doing so well it never even bothered to apply for any of the numerous federal and state grants that had become the mainstay of most non-profit arts organizations during the 1960s and ‘70s,” a newspaper story reported a few years later (Butler 1982). By Jim Hirsch’s estimate, student numbers had fallen from more that a thousand per week in the late 1970s to around 300 per week in 1982 (Rand 1983). The School’s fundraising efforts, while apparently regular, rarely went beyond benefit concerts, bake sales and simply passing the hat. As the School’s constituency dwindled, therefore, so too did the money, and apparently the leadership was not successful in reaching beyond the immediate folk music
community for help. “We aren’t getting the kind of local support we need to stay alive here,” Tate told a reporter (Butler 1982).

Meanwhile, musical tastes were changing. The Folk Boom was long gone, and even acoustic music in general was disappearing from mainstream popular tastes. With first disco, then heavy metal, punk, New Wave and the like dominating the radio and the new MTV, it was an electronic age, exploiting the rapidly developing potentials of the synthesizer and electric guitar. Tate certainly did not feel that he had his finger on the musical pulse of the city; his analysis in 1982 was: “There’s really no one kind of music that’s dominant today[….] Disco is out, country/rock is out, and even the punk places are closing down. Even folk clubs today don’t always feature folk music” (Butler 1982). In fact, the wellspring of popular music innovation at the time was MTV and its synthesis of song and image, dependent on cutting-edge media production technology—a realm of musical creativity far beyond the purview of the Old Town School.

Tate went on to say, “I don’t know…maybe it’s our image. Many people think this is only a place for professionals. It’s true we’ve turned out quite a few, but that’s not really what we’re about[….] We want to get those guitars out of the closets and back in use” (Butler 1982). The School’s image problem may have been that they were not appealing enough to the casual player by virtue of the kind of musicians they were known for (such as Steve Goodman, John Prine, and Bonnie Koloc). But judging from the School’s actual, street-level appearance, however, it was more likely that its lack of professionalism was the bigger issue—Elaine Moore recalls walking passed the building in the early 1980s, before she was hired, and thinking it must be “for crazy people now.” “I was afraid to go in. It looked so creepy! Very foreboding, the
whole façade was all boarded up” (Moore interview 2005a). That was certainly the hypothesis that Hirsch and the Board that hired him believed, to positive effect.

On top of these difficulties, the country was going through a recession, experiencing unemployment rates of nine to ten percent, the highest until 2009.¹ Morale at the School was low. “I never actually got in the middle of it, but I remember there was a little—someone was actually trying to organize a strike at one point, but nothing materialized. I remember seeing lots of closed-door meetings with very tense faces,” Michael Miles recalled (Miles interview 2005a). By 1981, the operating deficit was $59,000 (Prescott 1987). Tate resigned in 1982 and moved to Texas, where he ran a horse ranch for a while, then joined a band called the Spirit of Texas, which became the state’s official cowboy band (Tate 2002).

The Board of Directors, tasked with hiring a new director, realized they were looking for a very different personality to lead the institution, someone with the drive, strategic mindset and idealism to save a sinking ship. Board member Kenton Morris pegged the young director of the Evanston branch of the Old Town School, Jim Hirsch, though this apparently was a result of Hirsch’s own initiative.

I was twenty-eight years old, and like most twenty-eight-year-olds I just had no idea of what the limits of reality were, and I believed that I could do it better. So I made an appointment and went and met with Kenton Morris and we spent about two to three hours together and I pretty much laid out what I thought was wrong with the School, and what I thought could be done to address it. And at the end of the conversation he essentially said, if we offered you the job, would you accept it? And without a second’s hesitation, I said “Sure!” [chuckles] (Hirsch interview, 2005)

Jim Hirsch. I interviewed Jim Hirsch in July of 2005. I was more anxious about this interview than any other. In 2005, the Old Town School was still living in the aftermath of his

controversial and upsetting departure. I had heard such a wide range of opinions and impressions of him—an organizational genius, a bureaucrat, a sincerely good person, a cold and unapproachable boss—that I didn’t know what to expect and it made me nervous. Soon after leaving the Old Town School, Hirsch was brought on as the executive director of the Chicago Sinfonietta, a position which he still holds. I met him at the Sinfonietta offices in an ordinary high-rise office building downtown on Lake Street.

Jim was of course busy and I had to wait at a conference table […]. Then Jim came out to greet me. He was dressed casually, but crisply, in jeans and a plaid shirt[….] Slim and not tall, firm but not aggressive handshake. He has a very steady gaze that seems somehow…not connecting, not warm. He was paradoxically both casual and formal, friendly and cool. He led me into his office and we sat at a side table for two. There was no hemming or hawing or fumbling from his end—he was completely ready for me. (Field notes for July 28, 2005)

I was correct to approach this interview differently; Hirsch was the most prepared, most professional, and most cautious of all my interviewees. He was also the only one who ever displayed any hint of hostility to any of my questions, though these moments blew over quickly, as he shifted quickly back and forth between professional formality and collegial informality, from cool caution to warmth.

First hired at the Old Town School as a guitar teacher around 1972, Hirsch had been director of its Evanston branch for a few years by 1982. He had taken some guitar lessons in his childhood in suburban Chicago, but not what he would call formal study. After switching majors several times at Southern Illinois University, including the university’s first acoustic music major, Hirsch dropped out in his sophomore year to pursue a guitar performance career in Chicago. He had not known about the Old Town School until then, but “every place I went, people were talking about Old Town. So, I got an appointment with Ray Tate and played for him, and he hired me as a teacher. And then he fired me.”
TL: He did! Why did he do that?

JH: Because I was a horrible teacher. And the reason I was a horrible teacher is that they didn’t train me at all. They basically put me in the class, and they gave me a Guitar 2 class, and I was teaching them stuff that advanced students wouldn’t have been able to play. They fired me, and then this guy named Bob Ganns who was running the Skokie branch hired me and actually taught me how to teach. And then the rest is history. (Hirsch interview 2005)

Hirsch followed the Skokie branch of the School when it moved to Evanston some time in the late 1970s, teaching at the local community college as well. In his employee file from 1978 (maintaining such records could well of been one of Hirsch’s own innovations), he listed guitar, mandolin and violin as instruments he could teach, and “everything” as courses he had taught there (OTSFM-RC). Hirsch soon took over the directorship of the Evanston branch, and by 1982, the branch had about 700 students of all ages, taught by about 50 teachers (Butler 1982).

The Old Town School’s lack of a clearly explained pedagogical system frustrated him. Unlike Frank Hamilton or Ray Tate, he apparently did not take to teaching instinctively, yet benefited and improved from Bob Ganns’ coaching. “He actually had curriculum, which was something that I don’t think they had very formally downtown. And he mentored me on how to do it. And he trained people—he cared about the educational content” (Hirsch interview 2005).

While teaching in Skokie and Evanston, he seems to have compiled a method book for the Old Town School (such a booklet exists in the OTSFM Resource Center, apparently dating from the 1970s; I was told it was Hirsch’s work, though it has no attribution).

Hirsch continued to develop as a musician and performer, playing small venues and earning some critical respect. He recorded and self-distributed a solo LP in 1979, Working on Steel, followed by Tricky Fingers, which was more of an ensemble effort. Both are eclectic collections including everything from traditional Irish tunes to early ragtime and jazz to Beatles songs to Bach movements. Both also include at least a couple of original compositions. These
seem to have been organized in places for maximum contrast, as on the second album, where the 1960s rock tune “Bus Stop” by the Hollies is followed by John Phillip Sousa’s “Stars and Stripes Forever,” and finally the old children’s song “Teddy Bear’s Picnic,” which concludes the album. Although a minority of his selections derive from an oral tradition and thus would typically be considered “folk,” the majority represent different styles of commercial popular music. Regardless of origin, none are played in a manner that would encourage group participation, but rather serve as showcases for Hirsch’s technical skill. Virtually all of the arrangements are highly contrapuntal with almost no chordal accompaniment, and in fact could be played effectively and enjoyably on the piano. Although Hirsch has a pleasant singing voice, he sings on only one song on the first album. While Working On Steel is strictly a solo guitar album, Tricky Fingers features several excellent backup musicians who constitute a jazz ensemble on most of the pieces, trading solos, as well as featuring other singers (at least two songs are duets).

Working on Steel was well reviewed (I did not find a review of the other recording); Guitar Player magazine described Hirsch’s fingerpicking as flawless and sensitive (1979). In Hirsch’s own words, his music was “a virtuoso approach to folk guitar; mix folk and classical and you end up with me” (clipping 1979, OTSFMR). He prided himself on his eclecticism: “I try to be diversified,” he told a Milwaukee reporter (Foy, n.d.). In retrospect, he described his style and tastes as “acoustic.”

But I also loved swing jazz. I loved classical guitar. If you listen to my second album there’s almost every style that there is on it. Which is probably one of the reasons that nobody bought it [both laugh]. I was always very musically eclectic. And to this day, my tastes are extremely eclectic. If it’s good, and if it resonates with the kind of stuff that I like and care about. I love all forms of world music, and I still love bluegrass and Celtic and some singer-songwriters, not so much that. Jazz. Classical. (Hirsch interview 2005)

But his first musical love was, in fact, the music of the Folk Boom.
I started with folk music. It was Peter, Paul and Mary that actually—some of their early recordings and Bob Dylan—that got me initially interested in folk music. And I remember seeing Peter, Paul and Mary at Ravinia in the early sixties. And oh, it was so cool. It was just great. So I started learning acoustic guitar, and then the Beatles happened, and I started playing electric guitar and I became a rocker. And then in my freshman and sophomore—the two years I was at college—I rediscovered acoustic music, and especially the music of Leo Kottke, John Fahey, some of the fingerstyle guitarists, and I fell in love with that style, so I learned how to do that, and that’s when I left college and came back to Chicago and started teaching and performing. (ibid.)

What set Hirsch apart, dramatically, from previous leaders of OTSFM was his aptitude for business. This was not a result of his education or personal background (at least, not more than most of his upwardly mobile contemporaries around the School), as much as a function of his personality and basic instincts. As he explained to me,

You know, the funny thing is you don’t really need a great business background to run most businesses. Mostly, it’s kind of common sense. You look at the way money flows in and the way it flows out, and you figure out how to balance them, or to at least change the relationship between them, so that it becomes more favorable[…] I think that I had a very good instinctual sense of what really the core strengths of the organization were, and why it could be relevant, compelling and successful in the marketplace. (Hirsch interview, 2005)

From early on, he was recognized for this quality, described by one reporter as “the Lee Iacocca of folk music” (Prescott 1987). Hirsch does not claim to have been entirely self-taught, but credits a number of mentors, including Board members Kenton Morris and Susan Church and WFMT radio executive Ray Nordstrand, and he took an ecumenical approach to his own education: “I tried to steal from everybody. Every time I saw something that looked good, I tried to figure out how it could be adapted and used for what we were trying to accomplish” (Hirsch interview, 2005). He proceeded from his own bottom-line-oriented common sense in assessment and decision making, as exemplified by the way he remembered approaching the initial crisis:

Well, obviously the biggest thing that was wrong was that it was structured in a way that the revenue it was generating was not sufficient to pay the expenses. Duh. Business 101. So, I felt that there was an opportunity to enhance the
revenue stream by fixing some of the things I thought were wrong with the way classes were structured and run. I felt that there was an opportunity to generate contributed income greater than what had been done in the past. And I thought I could probably control costs in such a way that it would make the model viable. (ibid.)

Hirsch did not perform much at all after becoming the director, aside from a little teaching early on; he simply didn’t have the time. “Actually, it pretty much drove me away from music,” he said, laughing, appreciating the irony. “But, you know, for me, that was always the most enjoyable part of it, was the business part. I love the music, but the real intellectual thrill ride for me was trying to figure out how to make it work” (ibid.).

Unsurprisingly, the reaction to Hirsch’s business logic was not always positive, running counter as it did to the idealistic values and pre-capitalist nostalgia of the folk revival ethos. As Lawrence Rand wrote in the Chicago Reader a couple of years into Hirsch’s tenure, “Folk music, it seems, is going to have to make its peace with a man who can say: ‘I have come to believe that it’s critically important that folk music has to be institutionalized. I know that goes against the grain of every folkie’s heart, but without the structure to do things, nothing ever gets done’” (Rand 1986). Hirsch’s approach unsettled several assumptions of the local folk music community.

As noted earlier, the North Side Chicago folk music community at the time was both insular and splintered. “Traddies,” those who adhered to a strict definition of folk music as old and orally transmitted—“traditional”—and in practice limited themselves to an Anglo-Celtic repertoire for the most part, objected to the inclusion of contemporary singer-songwriters under the “folk music” banner. The latter (and their supporters) felt that the traddies were too inflexible. Neither group, however, was making a significant effort to reach beyond an Anglo-American repertoire or beyond a constituency that was white, educated, middle class, and
presumably politically liberal. Accordingly, the scene was socially intimate, with a certain degree of exclusivity built in through self-selection, even though the Old Town School had never stopped espousing a policy of inclusivity. Jim Hirsch disagreed with this cliquish tendency.

There was a little bit of tension at the time between the quote “traditional” folkies, who liked the real traditional white [... ] keepers of the “true music,” whatever the hell that meant, and then the more pop singer-songwriters elements of, if you like the term “folk music.” [...] The other instinct that I had was, the more narrowly you defined folk music, the less chance you ever had of making it successful. So there was one group of people, especially very early on, who were “The School’s gotta go back to its traditional roots!” You know? You’ve got to have Gordon Bok here every weekend, or whoever they were. I just thought, God, that’s ignorant. We’ll never really be able to affect the marketplace if that’s all we do. (Hirsch interview 2005)

However his intentions were interpreted, Hirsch’s interest in broadening the School’s appeal was readily apparent to all and threatening to some. In retrospect, Hirsch was able to cast the change as relatively peaceful, despite the defections of a few purists. Hirsch is certainly justified in claiming that in the long run, his strategy has been fully embraced.

In the very, very early days, I think that they [“traddies”] felt that they could really exert influence, and pressure to some degree. But the funny thing is, the bigger the School got, the more it all fit into its proper thing. So, it was never confrontational. It was always me wanting to try to serve as many different segments of the community as we could. So I listened to people like Emily Friedman—and Joel Olvin[?] And some of the other traddies. I mean, I’m sure some of them thought of me as the anti-Christ. Which is, you know, that’s ok. But I think some of them who were more thoughtful understood that there was a broader strategy at work here that was only meant to lift all of the boats. To not minimize anything, but to provide opportunity and audience for every form. (ibid.)

Although he used the tools and language of the corporate world to measure and pursue success, Jim Hirsch cared fervently about the Old Town School’s mission, which he saw as:

To make the traditional and contemporary musical and dance expressions of real people accessible. And to have a place where people could learn, without going to a conservatory, but really more as a cultural clearinghouse, I think. (Hirsch interview 2005)
After he described anyone willing to work in the Armitage building before the 1987 remodel as “a committed lunatic,” I asked him, “Were you a committed lunatic?” “Oh, God,” he replied, “So far out of any proportion, yeah. Very committed. I believed in it. I thought it was a quest. It wasn’t a job for me, it was like a crusade” (ibid.).

Once hired, and with the support of the Board, Hirsch immediately began making major changes to pull the School back to financial health. Kenton Morris was quoted a year later saying, “Last year, we had to stabilize. We didn’t solve our problems, but we treated the symptoms” (Rand 1983). At first, OTSFM couldn’t even afford to pay Hirsch’s salary (Rand 1986). “My first move upon becoming executive director was essentially to eliminate three out of the five administrative positions. And it was basically run by me and our business manager, a very interesting lady by the name of Linda King” (Hirsch interview 2005). This was primarily for financial reasons (clearly, the money was not there to pay them), but Hirsch also observed that “there was a couple of people that were just—shouldn’t have been there probably. So we gave them an opportunity to pursue other career interests” (ibid.). The Board was expanded and a forty-five-member associate board formed. A neighboring building was sold, yielding short-term funding. Teachers were mobilized into fundraising efforts and made sacrifices as well, as harmonica teacher Skip Landt recalls (I suspect the dates he cites here are off by a couple of years):

Back when the School went through its financial crisis back in ‘85 or ‘86, the School for a while was having trouble paying its bills, a number of us volunteered to teach without being paid. For a while. It didn’t go on for long, amazingly enough. I did that. We also used to have a campaign, around that same time, where teachers would have an active role in fundraising. We’d write letters to our students and ask for contributions. The teacher who got the largest number of contributions would get— I think this went on for three or four years, a couple of years it was a Yugo [car], one year it was a trip to France[....] I came in second twice, I think. Both times, the second prize was a guitar. (Landt interview 2005)
Revitalizing the curriculum

Having averted disaster, Hirsch wasted no time in moving forward in developing the School’s potential for growth, towards the Board’s vision of a bigger, better, more inclusive Old Town School. As Board member Kenton Morris told the Chicago Sun-Times, “I think it’s time we re-examined ourselves. I’ve always wanted to see the school become a resource center. There isn’t another place like it. But we can’t put our heads in the sand because somebody somewhere said, ‘But that isn’t folk music!’” (Rand 1983). Observing that OTSFM had once been and still had the potential to become an umbrella for folk music writ broadly, Morris went on to say, “The school wants that umbrella organization feeling back. I don’t know that we’ll ever achieve everything that Dawn Greening and people like her managed to do, but our goal is the spirit of the fifties in the organization of the eighties” (Rand 1983).

Michael Miles. With teaching at the core of the Old Town School’s purpose, Hirsch’s first administrative hire was, appropriately, someone to rebuild the educational program. In 1984, Hirsch hired banjo teacher Michael Miles to design and coordinate the curriculum and course offerings and to hire and manage the teaching staff for $165 per week, part time (though Miles quickly moved to full-time status). Although Frank Hamilton’s method for group teaching, including the tradition of the Second Half, was still intact, the offerings had dwindled and there seemed to be no overarching educational vision, according to Miles.

As I looked at it, at that point, the School had been kind of in a downward spiral, and it seemed to me that not a lot of imagination had been put into educational programming. And it seemed like it was something good that was waiting to succeed, if someone did that. So, I started making a bunch of changes. (Miles interview, 2005a)

Hirsch’s choice was a perceptive and accurate one; Miles turned out to be very much on the same page as he was and would stay for fifteen years, establishing most of the curricular features
of the OTSFM still in place in the 2000s. Jimmy Tomasello testified, “Michael Miles, I would say, is the reason the Old Town School is what it is. Michael Miles is the freakin’ bomb. All the way, all the way. All the humanity that this school has was because of Michael Miles, and nowhere else” (Tomasello interview 2005a). Tomasello was far from alone in that opinion.

I interviewed Michael Miles twice in 2005, about three months apart. He was leading a tightly scheduled life, self-employed as a performing musician, and dividing his efforts between educational outreach; musical composition; recording; and writing, directing and performing historically themed theatre pieces that combined music and spoken word—all projects that were self-created, self-marketed and self-managed. In addition, he was still teaching a few students at the Old Town School. It was hard to pin him down for an interview. Our first one was a little uncertain. As I wrote afterwards, “I was not sure how to react to MM or vice versa at that time, I think. He strikes me as someone who’s learned to be cautious the hard way. Not that he’s ever been extroverted or impulsive, I imagine, but I’m sure he used to be more idealistic” (field notes for July 5, 2005). But Michael is a natural storyteller, and a professional one; over two interviews, he shared with me three hours of vivid anecdotes and memories. As with Frank Hamilton, many of these stories had a certain rehearsed quality—not rote, but refined. In fact, his upcoming show was on the same theme as many of my interview questions. “Will You Play Us a Tune Uncle John?” to be performed that November at the Chicago Humanities Festival, involved a cast of seven Chicago musicians portraying the moments in their home lives that first introduced them to music-making and those that shaped their musical lives.

Michael Miles first came to the Old Town School in 1979, to teach. “I heard about the School and I thought it’d be fun to teach there, and I thought they probably had enough guitar teachers, so I went over and introduced myself as a banjo teacher, even though I’d never really
taught the banjo before—I’d played it, some. And it turned out that Ray Tate, who was the
director at the time, didn’t have anybody teaching banjo at the time—clawhammer style—and so
he hired me right away.” At first, however, Miles refused to teach group classes, “because I
didn’t think it was possible to do so”—he laughs at himself in retrospect—and only taught one
night a week for several years (Miles interview 2005a).

Born in 1954 on the West Side of Chicago, he grew up mostly in Oak Park, Chicago’s
nearest suburb to the west—and coincidentally, the same town that the Greening family lived in.
The Miles family was a blue-collar, Irish American family. Miles observed that, unlike the
Italians, “you don’t find Irish restaurants, what you find are Irish arts. There’s Irish musicians
and Irish writers. And I felt like in some capacity, I was part of that” (Miles interview 2005b).
He has even gone so far as to apply for an Irish passport in recent years. His parents, second-
generation Irish, were raised during the Depression and had “a pretty serious work ethic.”
Michael’s father installed electricity meters for Commonwealth Edison. After her husband’s
death, Michael’s mother worked her way up from secretary to management at Standard Oil, with
only a high school education.

Music was something that everybody shared in the Miles home; parties at their house
often gravitated toward the player piano: “everybody would play, and they had all these piano
rolls of showtunes, like ‘Seventy-Six Trombones’ and ‘To Dream the Impossible Dream’ and
any kind of sing-along kinds of songs.” His father’s sister, Aunt Marge, a nun, and her best
friend Sister Angelita stand out in particular. “One of my earliest recollections is I’m standing at
this piano, and not much taller than the piano keys, and Angelita’s in her habit, but she’s got her
sleeves rolled up, and she’s got these big forearms—’cause she was a big woman—and she’s
banging away at the piano, really playing it. Playing barrelhouse blues, and she had this low, bluesy kind of voice—which was funny for a nun” (Miles interview 2005b).

But formal musical education was not a significant feature of his childhood. Miles’s first music lesson was “a dreadful experience.” When he was about seven, his mother took him for ukulele lessons. “We were issued a plastic bag with a plastic ukulele inside and a book. ‘Ok, take your ukuleles out.’ I took mine out and I dropped it and it broke—it broke! [The teacher] got all upset and I had to call my mom to come and get me and that was the end of that.” A few years later, he took up trumpet at school. Although he was too young to have been in the Folk Boom generation, Michael was the youngest of five, and so was exposed to that music early on when his elder brother formed a folk group inspired by the Kingston Trio; inspired, Michael picked up guitar at home (Miles interview 2005b).

He went to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for college, where he eventually ended up majoring in Oral Interpretation, a combination of theatre and literary criticism offered through the Department of Speech. “It’s like putting poetry on stage, and stories on stage”—which turns out to be very similar to the performances he creates now, thirty years later. By the time he declared this major, he had actually already decided on a career in music, but it was too late to take up a music major as an undergraduate.

It was during his junior year abroad, which he spent at the University of Lancaster in England, that he decided he was going to be a musician. He was inspired by his guitar teacher there, someone he felt a real connection with, and experienced a personal epiphany, realizing, “There’s something that happens when you play music that is peaceful and is beautiful and is enduring and different from anything else.” Although his family’s reaction was mixed, it was much more supportive than it might have been in many families. “In my family […]
intellectualism was something that was encouraged, and not necessarily being practical about it.” His Aunt Marge sent him a boxed set of classical guitar music, including the Bach Cello Suites performed by John Williams, which he ended up listening to over and over for years.

Eventually, in the 1990s, he recorded a CD of the cello suites on banjo, “in part I think because I had internalized them for a long time […] because Aunt Marge gave me that recording. [It’s] funny in hindsight, piecing all these little things together” (Miles interview 2005b).

It seemed to him that the next logical step towards becoming a musician would be to enter the University of Illinois School of Music for a Masters degree. He had composed some mandolin and flute music earlier, without really knowing how to read or write music, and it had been well received, so he sought an opinion from the department chair. “So I make this appointment with this guy, because I wanted him to listen to it and give me an opinion. And he wouldn’t listen to it. And I was so angry. And I thought, well, OK, but there have to be better people at this place, even though you’re in charge of it, there’s gotta be better people.” He mustered the prerequisites, auditioned, and got in. But he was quickly disillusioned. It turned out his first impression was not misleading. “I thought, this place is one of the most a-musical places I have ever experienced, and it’s a university music school! So I left. And I thought…for what I don’t know, which is vast, I’ll just find the people who know it, and learn from them[…] There’s too much arrogance and weird ego stuff here going on.” He laughed (realizing, no doubt, where I study) as he told me, “One of the things that I thought, as I had the opportunity to design the educational program, it was going to be the antithesis of what I’d experienced at the University of Illinois!” (Miles interview 2005b).

Miles crafted his musical career on his own, choosing his own teachers and working hard—very much as Jim was doing at about the same time, though the two did not cross paths
until Miles began working at the Old Town School. It was actually in Europe that Miles first picked up the banjo. He was touring the continent as part of a street theatre group he had joined in England, and had started playing banjo in the show, applying what he knew from fingerpicking guitar. One night at a campground, he met a French banjo player who really knew his way around the instrument, both bluegrass and clawhammer styles—Miles had never seen the latter. “I’m right next to him, and I say, ‘What is it that you’re doing on the banjo?’ And he said, ‘Eet eez frailing.’ And this was the first time I’d ever seen this or heard this. I was enchanted. I just thought it was a beautiful sound.” Upon his return to Chicago he started learning the style. “So that was kind of a big turning point moment.” The same year he was hired as the Old Town School’s program director, Miles had a book published, Teach Yourself to Play Clawhammer Banjo (Kicking Mule Records, 1984). “When I got hired as Program Director, there were lots of people who had similar experience as me, who’d played here and there and done this and that, but I actually had a book about how to play the banjo. It sort of maybe made me a little different” (Miles 2005a).

Miles has never considered himself a folk musician, per se—“just a musician.”

In part because I had always liked all these—it was in my bones, all these different styles. I love those old showtunes and stuff from the player piano. And I love that sort of Renaissance-sounding classical stuff. I liked it all. And I didn’t ever feel that I was ever exactly a jazz musician or a classical musician. And I still don’t. I just think of myself as a musician[...] It did all come down to rhythm and melody and that all these musics are one, and why can’t you go from bluegrass to Bach to Charlie Parker to Billie Holiday back to Woody Guthrie? And that in fact the juxtaposition of those things is interesting. (Miles interview 2005b)

He is not an anti-traditionalist, however. “I mean I do like strict traditions. I like people who play traditional Irish music, or traditional jazz[...] But that’s as a listener—I do like those separations.”
Around 1988, Miles began a correspondence with Pete Seeger. Seeger had sent him a letter, saying, “Dear Mike, Looks like you’re doing a good job here [at OTSF]. Keep up the good work. Your friend, Pete”—this made a huge impression on Miles: “I’m like, Oh! Just another living legend sending me a fan letter! [laughs]” (Miles interview 2005a). He sent Seeger a recording, which Seeger, with typical enthusiasm said was beautiful enough to make him want to learn to play the banjo all over again, and the two have been corresponding ever since. In his one-man show “The Magic Banjo,” Miles incorporates Pete’s testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, in which Seeger pled the First Amendment in his own defense, leading to years of court battles. Miles thus finds himself a “bearer” of Pete Seeger’s folk-revivalist tradition. “That was the first real powerful endorsement I had of my artistic side[....] Then, from there, things started to spiral for me in lots of other ways. But that was kind of a turning point, connecting with Pete” (ibid.).

Miles transmits tradition in his musical performances and musical work, but does not feel bound to it. Rather than faithfully reproduce the music of older banjo players and contemporary traditionalists, “to me, that just opens up a door. It’s like, OK, as long as there’s guys doing that, I don’t really have worry about it. And with all due respect to them […] I feel that my contribution is not doing that, because I didn’t know those guys. I grew up in Chicago, I taught myself to play, I didn’t grow up in the hills of who-knows-where. So I [prefer] using folk music and folk instruments to create new sounds” (Miles interview 2005a).

I attended Michael Miles’s CD release concert in the Old Town School concert hall on May 22, 2005. The CD, *New Century Suite*, featured Miles on banjo performing several of his own compositions, as well as a little Bach, accompanied by banjoist Bela Fleck, jazz singer Jackie Allen, local percussionist Tony Dale, and essentially a chamber orchestra. Miles draws
from diverse genres, including blues, classical and jazz, framed overall in the aesthetic of
presentational, pre-composed concert music. “New Century Suite,” “Chicago Trilogy,” and
“Firefly Sonata”—all original Miles compositions—are multi-movement, complex, polyphonic
works requiring virtuosic skill, and the performers read music from music stands.

The room was about half full, but it seemed to be all loyal fans, very engaged and
enthusiastic, excited to be there, sharing in Michael’s excitement to bring out
something new[….] What Michael does seems closely related to the Bela Fleck
approach to banjo. As Michael said, “the world of experimental banjo is
extremely small”—in an intro to the Chicago Suite, which he does with Bela on
the CD. Some of it is outright classical—he played two movements of Bach’s
Third Cello Suite (Courante and Gigue, I think) to open the second half. And he
opened the first half with a courante and gigue of his own composition, very
Baroque-sounding[….] In the various multi-movement works MM performed, the
audience invariably clapped between movements (including me—I hate the
practice of not doing so) and he always smiled graciously and did not seem
bothered by it. But he also did not talk between movements, a contrast with his
otherwise very chatty presentation[….] But then he also has an obviously deep
knowledge of traditional music—the blues he played on the low-pitched
nineteenth-century fretless banjo (made from the wood of a tree that stood
through a famous battle of the Civil War). And his social sense and performance
style was folk. That is, he was extremely conversational, told lots of stories, there
was some interaction between stage and audience. (Field notes for May 22, 2005)

Thus, while Miles operates almost entirely within a presentational aesthetic of music making,
even employing the compositional complexity of Western art music, like many performers in the
folk music world, he continues to evoke a participatory feel in his performances, in his informal
and self-deprecating stage presence.

Hiring a new team. When he took the program director position, Miles was, in a way,
coming in as an outsider, even though he’d been working there for five years, since he had only
been there one night a week, teaching privately, and interacting little with the other teachers and
students. Like Hirsch, one of his first moves was to reassess staffing. “Person by person, I
thought, I will shape this place by the personnel whom I hire” (Miles interview 2005a). He took
an approach that directly echoed Win Stracke’s original intent for the School to be a source of
steady employment for working Chicago musicians, though it’s unlikely that Miles realized that at the outset, but rather was acting on his own instincts.

I inherited this list of teachers, and some of the teachers I knew and some of them I didn’t. Lot of people were kind of on the argumentative side, and that also struck me as peculiar, ‘cause I thought, this was not the place where things should be argumentative[….] I made it my own practice that I would look for people who were full-time musicians. It created a sort of a financial policy where I could give more work to people who…there are lots of good computer programmers who play the guitar, but I wanted to give it to a guitar player, who was trying to make a living in it, because I thought that would make a difference […] for that kind of person, and that kind of person would also be available in the daytime for other kinds of things. And that we could create instead of this list of argumentative folks […] a whole community of musicians. We could enjoy one another, learn from one another, work with one another. (Miles interview 2005a)

Contrary to Tate’s feeling that he had been professionalizing the faculty, Miles’s early impression was one of amateurism, and a Chicago Reader article noted, “After a decade of alienating a large section of the professional folk musicians in town, the OTSFM now employs them as teachers, a common practice during Stracke’s tenure” (Rand 1986). It had apparently become common for the OTSFM to hire insiders; perhaps this became a trend as the School’s health declined. “It was a grass-rootsy kind of place and people go from being volunteers to being Board members. They’d go through the guitar classes, and then they’d start teaching them” (ibid.). Both Miles and Hirsch saw that revitalizing the School required new blood, tapping into the wealth of talent Chicago had to offer. Miles did not necessarily wait for job applicants to come to him, but sought them out…

…through sometimes just beating the streets and soliciting people on stage and stuff. And through word of mouth, if I needed another guitar teacher or whatever kind of teacher, I’d ask the current people who they knew, and because I had tried to set this high standard for the people that I would get in there, they in turn knew good people and so it spiraled that way. (Miles interview 2005a)
Musicianship and performance experience were important, but for Miles, the quality that uniquely qualified a musician to teach at the Old Town School was the ability to communicate well.

I was always on the lookout for people who, too, just [had] communications skills. Oftentimes people would come in for job interviews feeling like they had to show me their musical expertise. But I generally had checked out their musical expertise before they got there and was more interested in if they looked me in the eye when they answered my questions, and communications skills. Because this is a small place, and I’m creating this utopian musical society here, of sorts, and I want people who other people are going to want to be around. (Miles interview 2005a)

A teaching staff of working musicians necessitated a distinctive kind of management, however, and a flexible attitude, which Miles could easily understand from personal experience.

Well, if you hire working musicians, everyone on the staff […] is dealing with financial strife all the time. [chuckles] We gain a lot there, but there’s this instability that those people are wrangling with that needs to be taken into consideration as we create this community. Because I want this community. Because I know this community can fly higher than anybody’s ever known. But they need some compassion, and understanding. (ibid.)

Miles tried to keep the teaching staff involved in hiring their colleagues to some extent, as well. At first, this had to have been rather ad hoc; a limited number of different instruments were taught, and to the extent that there were departments, they were created by trial and error. Over time, Miles was able to build departments around programs, such as guitar, percussion, dance, voice, and jazz and blues. Through this structure, he tried to give autonomy to instructors to help him develop each area. “When I had enough people to create a professional department, then I did” (Miles interview 2005a). Especially in areas where he had less personal expertise, such as voice classes, he made the hiring process a collaborative one.

I wouldn’t hire a voice teacher without consulting the current voice teachers, because I trusted my expertise in some areas, but I wanted to lean on other people, and give them some ownership. Well, you’re here, if I’m going to hire a voice
teacher, you’re going to be working with them, you need to respect them anyway, so you help me check ‘em out, see what you think. (ibid.)

The administrative staff, meanwhile, remained small throughout the 1980s; Jim Hirsch, Linda King, and Michael Miles were later joined by Michelle Hirsch and Elaine Moore. The relationships between these people, the ones present every day making the organizational decisions, especially Jim and Michael, was significant. In some ways, the two men seem remarkably similar: white men of about the same age and Chicago-born and bred, both had pursued wide-ranging interests in public universities downstate, finally settling on music (specifically, guitar) as their calling, but both had found the structured, university approach to musical training frustrating and unfulfilling, so had set off to educate themselves using the resources Chicago had to offer. In their twenties, each cobbled together musical careers out of performing and teaching, and tried their hand at developing pedagogical methods (Hirsch in his work at the Evanston branch of OTSFM, Miles with his clawhammer banjo book). Both displayed a certain reserve in their personal carriage and valued brilliant yet controlled virtuosic display in their playing; both seem to have had a great deal of personal confidence. Neither has ever identified with a single musical genre or style, even temporarily, but have maintained eclectic tastes and resisted drawing boundaries between musical styles, while still acknowledging the categories’ descriptive relevance. And both discovered innate organizational talents that they developed at the Old Town School.

In the way they related to other people, they were quite different. Their contrasting personalities helped them work out complementary roles, as Frank Hamilton and Win Stracke had. “Hirsch was a manager. Michael was the heart of the school, and the innovator” (Landt interview 2005). Miles remembers one of his early impressions of Hirsch:
My first encounters with him were, he was always like a busy guy. [chuckles] I remember saying “hello” to him and he sort of would brush on by. I finally stopped and I said, “I’m sorry, I said hello to you and you just walked on by, and you just can’t do that. I’m the best banjo teacher here at the School and you need to know that. And I don’t accept that people walk by me if I say hello to them!” (Miles interview 2005a)

Skip Landt had a similar impression of Hirsch, along with great warmth for Miles, though he was sympathetic to both men. He remembers an illustrative incident with each.

Mary was walking down the hallway, feeling “I don’t even have a mailbox here, people can’t even leave messages for me.” There wasn’t really anyone designated to do stuff like that. So Michael’s walking down the hall, and sees her, sees she doesn’t look happy, and she says “I can’t find my fucking mailbox.” And he says “Oh, come on, we’ll get you a mailbox.” He just went and did it. That’s so much of that style, one of the things that Michael was always doing was visiting classes then putting comments in people’s boxes. “Really liked your class.” Just that personal kind of touch[…].

Hirsch’s eyes were looking outward into the city. One year his name was on the list of the fifty most important Chicagoans. In terms of how do we build up the school’s financial reserves, how do we get people, how do we market it? Michael’s is more the inside part. If you had a problem and talked to Hirsch, he would have some slightly dry, ironic way of dealing with it, while Michael would try to solve it. So I think any frustrations, any dealing with Hirsch was likely to be a frustrating one where if you see him at all, you talk to him for a couple minutes.

An example for me, at one point I was afraid I was going to lose my job at the City College. I had a couple of young kids. I can’t remember what I wanted from him, either a recommendation or something. And he was…not very interested. No personal warmth at all. A person like that, even if they’re doing an excellent job in every other way—and I think he was—doesn’t evoke any magnetism, no charisma. (Landt interview 2005)

Landt recalled a particular characterization of Hirsch from a Chicago Reader article: “when he says something like ‘It’s so exciting, I can’t tell you,’ it seems to come out in a tone of voice most people reserve for ‘Please shut the door on your way out’” (Rand 1986). “That isn’t entirely true,” Landt clarified to me. “He was charming in this ironic kind of way. But there wasn’t anything very satisfying about any conversation with him” (Landt interview 2005).
Elaine Moore remembered using the metaphor of a family to explain their relationship and how the two related with others in a past conversation with Miles:

“I said, “This is the most dysfunctional family. Jim is the dad, and Michael is the mom.” If you want to talk to somebody, you go in to talk to Michael, and he’ll say, “What your father means is…he didn’t mean to upset you.” [TL and EM laugh] “What he really meant was this.” And then you’d go in and get all yelled at by Jim, or something, or he’d be a big jerk. Then you’d go back to Michael [in a teary voice]: “Michael!” “It’s ok, he didn’t mean it.” (Moore interview 2005a)

In fact, the “family” was quite functional for a long time; mutual respect and a shared sense of mission generally kept their relationship on track.

There were times when we were at odds with one another, but pretty much he let me be, he let me do my job, and I left him to do his job, and they were complementary. And we’d come together to celebrate and collaborate where it was appropriate, and separate where that was appropriate, and that worked really well for a long, long time. (Miles interview 2005a)

*Attracting students.* Hiring teaching and administrative staff was ultimately, of course, in the service of attracting more students, a goal both Hirsch and Miles shared and almost immediately began seeing successes. Miles estimates that student enrollment doubled between 1984 and 1987, when the building remodel was completed. While Hirsch took on marketing and fundraising, Miles spearheaded the enhancement and restructuring of the curriculum to attract, retain and benefit more students. In 1984, the only group classes offered were guitar, harmonica and banjo. Over the next few years, voice, percussion, fiddle, and the Wiggleworms program for infants and toddlers were added. Scheduling was adjusted so that two classes per evening could be offered, at 6:30 and 8:30 instead of just one at 7:30, as had been the case since the 1950s. “And all of a sudden there were classes filling up at both time slots, so enrollment jumped” (Miles interview 2005a).

Some time in the 1980s, Miles had a minor epiphany, courtesy of the principal of his daughter’s Montessori school. Miles had gone in to ask if his daughter could skip a grade; his
question was answered with a question. “Well, Mr. Miles, do you know the difference between vertical and horizontal enrichment?” He did not. “Well, vertical enrichment is when you learn something new, and horizontal enrichment is when you learn what you already know more completely[……] And that’s a good thing.” And he realized that the Old Town School had been missing a horizontal enrichment component.

Because at that point all we had were, the guitar classes went 1, 2, 3, 4, and there was a class called Intermediate and a class called Advanced, so there were six guitar classes. And if you went through them one through six, one after another, you’d be in the class called “advanced guitar” at the end of your first year of playing. So of course no one could make it. So everyone realized somewhere along the way that they had to repeat classes. And of course the only time you repeat classes in life is when you flunk. So, I thought, well, what we need are some intermediate classes, in between each one. So that was the birth of the repertory classes, so that you’d go from 1 to 1 Rep. And the idea of the rep classes was horizontal enrichment! You would not learn anything new, technically, but you’d learn more tunes at the same degree of difficulty as the regular classes. So now, instead of going through the program in one year, theoretically, you could go through two years, never having to repeat a class. So that, also, contributed to more happiness. (Miles interview 2005a)

Before growth started accelerating, it was sometimes a challenge just to fill classes to avoid cancelling them.

There were empty seats in the classes. So, I said I wanted to have a scholarship program. But I didn’t want to administer anything complicated. So I said, “Let’s just do this. Let’s just say, anyone who wants to take a class, who can’t afford to pay for it, can take a class. And we’ll put that in the catalog.” And I’m not sure if it’s still there or not, but it just says, “No one will be refused admittance to the Old Town School because of inability to pay” or something[……] And it said, if you want a scholarship, fill out this form. And I didn’t want anybody’s Social Security number, I didn’t want to know anything about their income[……] If I had a space in a class, you could take it, just for filling out the form. So shortly, I don’t know, six months after that’s out, there’s maybe fifty people, or a hundred people in the scholarship program. (Miles interview 2005)

Meanwhile, Jim Hirsch was learning how to fund and market the Old Town School. He started pursuing grants and gifts immediately upon taking the directorship.
The very first foundation grant that we got was from the McCormick Foundation, and a pretty conservative foundation, too, by the way [ . . . . ] It was a real watershed moment, it was an acknowledgment of what we were doing a good housekeeping seal of approval, that if a fairly conservative foundation was investing us, others would. MacArthur Foundation was an early investor in us, and a very generous investor. Illinois Arts Council, important early supporter. Joyce Foundation. There were a few others that came on board really early. And that provided what was essentially venture capital, and allowed us to build capacity, build programming, mark better. (Hirsch interview 2005)

In 1984, OTSFM was awarded an Advancement Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), a technical assistance grant of $75,000 (requiring $150,000 in matching funds) to advance organizational development, the end product of which was to be a five-year plan.

Notably, The Old Town School had received their highest ratings in the grant competition process for management and fiscal matters, only two years into Hirsch’s tenure. Furthermore, the grant included a mentoring component, in which a consultant from the NEA would help the School “develop the sophisticated managerial and fundraising skills needed to achieve long-term stability,” representing a growing trend in the arts world to support administration improvements (NEA press release, quoted in Dobransky 2007, 249). Hirsch told the Chicago Reader, [The grant] has made us do things we have never done before; for example, we now have a personnel policy. We have specific criteria for concerts, classes and workshops. We’ve begun work on an overall marketing plan for every phase of the operation. The most exciting work, in my opinion, is being done by the program committee, deciding, “Hey, what do we want to be? What do we want to do when we grow up?” It turns out that we’re convinced that we have to broaden the base of the school by intelligently, selectively, slowly reaching out into the community and working with specific ethnic groups. It’s going to be a very long-term process, because—you know—the school is pretty white.” (Rand 1986)

Expansion: New Music, New Markets

By 1985, there had been sufficient growth to justify a much needed renovation of the building. The NEA Grant had included $10,000 for building work, which was used to hire an
architectural firm. In line with the “umbrella organization” vision Kenton Morris had expressed in 1983, the remodel was intended to create a more holistic folk music experience within the walls of the School—again, not inconsistent with the School’s goals under Hamilton and Stracke. “You could come to the school and get the whole nine yards—come to the school and hear the music in concert, see the artifacts of the music, and learn music in a class: a holistic approach to the subject, which I think will be unique in the country,” Hirsch told a reporter at the time (Rand 1986).

Elaine Moore. It was during the six-month renovation, when the School operated out of the run-down Irish American Heritage Center, that Elaine Moore was hired as a part-time receptionist, answering an ad in the Chicago Reader. “When I first started working there? It’s amazing I didn’t run screaming,” she recalled. “The guy sitting there when I walked in the first day, he showed me my job in five minutes. You picked up the phone and said ‘hello,’ and when people came in, you took their money[....] After training me for five minutes, he was like, ‘So do you like to do crossword puzzles?’ ‘Is that it?’ ‘Yeah, that’s basically it (E. Moore interview 2005a). She was unimpressed, but took the job, at about $5.50 an hour, which was actually considerably above minimum wage at the time. “It’s just ‘cause it was the Old Town School and it seemed like it was a good thing.” I met Elaine early on in my fieldwork, in the fall of 2004, as the teacher of my vocal techniques class. I enjoyed her ebullient personality and learned a lot in her class. I asked to interview her because of her heavy involvement in the School as a teacher—in addition to her vocal classes, she taught guitar as well and could be seen several nights a week at Second Half. I had no idea then just how involved she had once been as an administrator.
Born in the early 1960s, Elaine grew up in Chicago’s South Shore neighborhood, in the small town of Lake Villa, Illinois, and in Lake Forest, a suburb north of Chicago, spanning urban, rural and suburban worlds. Her father started out in the Air Force before retiring to become a middle school teacher; her mother taught elementary school. Elaine grew up listening to hand-me-down Win Stracke and Pete Seeger records—her first context for “folk music.”

Like Michael Miles and David Roche, she was the youngest in the family by several years, and so was exposed to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and other 1960s and 1970s popular music as a young child, when her siblings were teenagers. “My older sisters had all the semi-folky kind of—Buffy Ste. Marie, you know? And there’s the Concert for Bangladesh—I’m just naming albums—Carole King, Tapestry[…] I was little, but those are the ones that I would put on.” Her father was also a music lover, and influenced her listening tastes.

I know a lot of old songs. And the funny thing is, the songs that we teach here now, when I think about it, the songs from the sixties? Sometimes we do songs from the sixties—they are now older to the people who hear them now than the songs from World War II were to me when my dad was singing them to me. It’s scary. But he was singing songs from the forties in the sixties. And we’re now doing songs from the sixties in the aughts, you know? That just blows me away, because it seemed like such a huge distance between his music and the Beatles, and it really wasn’t! (E. Moore interview 2005a)

Her whole family was musically inclined and sang as well as listened. Her grandfather was an Irish tenor and sang community events like weddings, funerals, and midnight mass in his small town. Like her father’s, his repertoire was dominated by the popular tunes of his generation, “turn of the century, ‘Daisy Daisy,’ that kind of thing,” favoring American Irish standbys like “Danny Boy.” Her paternal aunt grew up playing the piano and singing, and, as mentioned above, took up the guitar in the 1950s and started at the Old Town School “right when the place opened.” She taught Elaine the basics of the guitar in her early teens, but when her brother took the instrument with him to college, she had to drop it for a while—Elaine still plays
her aunt’s guitar today. Meanwhile, she was singing in the choir at school, where she learned to read music. “I always had a voice” (E. Moore interview 2005b).

As a teenager, discovering her own musical passions, she “had a Joni Mitchell epiphany.” She had inherited her sisters’ old Joni Mitchell albums and listened to them constantly—“they weren’t really old at the time, when I was in high school, but it seemed like no one else I knew had heard of them[….] I swear to God I would have been able to start at the first song, word one of a couple of those LPs, sing through both sides, including the key changes, no problem[….] I must have listened thousands of times. With my dad coming in and saying ’Oh my God, she sounds like a screeching cat! Turn that off!’” It was listening to Joni Mitchell that “caused me to feel like I could sing, and why I like the guitar[….] I taught myself to sing by singing along with those LPs. No question. Not the voice lessons” (E. Moore interview 2005b).

Elaine went to college at Indiana University, in Bloomington, Indiana, where she double-majored in English literature and radio and television, graduating in 1983. Throughout her college career, she took private voice lessons at the university’s highly regarded School of Music. “We would have to do juried performances for the voice faculty, which was terrifying. But I sincerely doubt they would have let me in that department, at I.U. I could have gotten into a lot of other music schools, but as a woman auditioning for the voice department at IU […] I just didn’t have the classical chops.” She also sang in various bands for fun and profit. While she had thoughts of making a career out of music, she does not take them seriously in retrospect.

Well, I was in a band, you know. [giggles] So everyone always has dreams of their band—I was always in a band. A new wave band, a rock-and-roll band. I was in a lounge band, between two guys from Panama, and we did covers of everything—resort, all summer long, five nights a week. But I think it slowly dawned on me that I was so bad at the self-promotion part of it—’cause I saw people who could do that—and I thought, this is clearly—I’m somehow bad at this. (E. Moore interview 2005b)
Her English major led her to her first job after college, writing for a trade magazine. But finding the job at the Old Town School in 1987 and being able to work in a musical environment again “was sort of a relief.” During that job search, she realized, “I like animals, and I like music—those are the only two things I like!” And she has been fortunate that those were the only two areas in which she has been employed ever since.

Until she was hired by OTSFM, however, Moore had had very little exposure to traditional music. Her exposure to music under the “folk” banner had been limited to singer-songwriters (like Joni Mitchell) and children’s music, but says she could not have told you what bluegrass was, much less identified a Macedonian bagpipe, as she can now. “I didn’t know there were other kinds of music to do. I was kind of dense. I was in Indiana [which was a] folkie world—folkie, folkie, folkie down there[….] You can get a degree in folk-something! I thought they were all weird.” Working at the Old Town School has been a long process of musical discovery for her. “I can remember hearing certain things for the first time and going, ‘yikes!’ Not liking it, it sounded so wrong! People playing the fiddle who weren’t playing classical violin, to me it just sounded awful[….] And Irish music? I had no idea! And I’m Irish! I thought it was ‘When Irish Eyes Are Smiling’[….] That kind of thing. Had no idea what traditional Irish music was.” Now she’s married to a musician who plays Irish music on bazouki and guitar, as well as bluegrass and old time string music. (E. Moore interview 2005b).

Despite the initial misgivings inspired by the questionable surroundings of the Irish American Center, Elaine was soon won over to the Old Town School cause. “I gave it that chance, going over to the Irish Center, saw what it was being transformed into, thought, ‘Wow, I’m going to stick with this place, it looks great!’” It was not long before she was a critical member of the administrative team, inventing new organizational elements still in use today.
Soon after she was hired, Jim Hirsch let Linda go; according to Elaine, “Jim could be somewhat brutal. I don’t know why. I don’t think he canned her, just lowered her pay so much that she quit.” Moore then became office manager, a catch-all position that included all the responsibilities that didn’t fit the others’ job descriptions, such as answering the phone, registering students, doing payroll, and managing the building (custodial, rentals, birthday parties, etc.). Hirsch, Miles and Moore all managed the concerts, on a rotating basis. Moore also coordinated the volunteers who ushered concerts and helped in other ways, developing a point system whereby volunteer hours could be converted to credit towards tuition. She managed referrals as well, booking gigs for Old Town School faculty at parties and other events. And around 1989, she started teaching guitar on top of that. Elaine was promoted again at some point to associate program director, working closely with Miles on programming, as well as coordinating private lessons—assigning students to teachers and scheduling rooms. She also edited the newsletter and the songbook with Miles and helped design brochures. By this time she was, of course, a full-time, salaried employee, but still answering the phones (E. Moore interview 2005a).

*Scaling up.* The Old Town School reopened on Armitage Avenue in September of 1987 (ahead of the remodel’s actual completion—“We were answering phones while redoing wood floors—turning green and throwing up,” Elaine remembers). The Old Town School’s thirtieth anniversary, celebrated over the weekend of December 4, served as a grand opening of sorts. It was the first such commemorative event to be video- as well as audiotaped. Jim Hirsch launched the evening’s entertainment with a rather limp, longwinded speech mostly concerning business aspects of the school. The fun picked up when he handed the microphone over to Studs Terkel, who, as master of ceremonies, framed each performer and song with a pithy, witty anecdote.
Local favorites like Fred Holstein performed and Frank Hamilton returned for a guest appearance, joined on stage—apparently unexpectedly—by Velucha DeCastro. The sense of reunion was strong (OTSFM 1987). Although these events were opportunities to indulge in collective nostalgia, for Miles and Hirsch, the anniversaries were held precisely in order to fuel the future: “They were important because they were fundraisers,” Miles told me firmly (Miles interview 2005a).

The continuity of the institution thus underscored, change came rushing into the new space. With the School now open to the street, through large storefront windows, with improved performance space and a central lobby for socializing, it was a welcoming environment for a new generation of traditional music enthusiasts. Starting immediately after the reopening and continuing for more than ten years, “every measurement just skyrocketed. Class numbers just went pow [explosion noise]. Concert attendance—pow. Profile—pow. Funding—pow. It was just like we’d taken steroids” (Hirsch interview 2005).

To a certain extent, this was due to the continuing efforts of the Old Town School staff at strategically improving service and outreach—though many of these changes were also necessitated by the resulting increase in enrollment. Even simple organizational logistics needed to be rethought. As late as 1987, they did not yet have a cash register or any electronic means of keeping records.

When you took their money, you put it in one of a series of colored pencil cases [almost giggling]—and this was the late eighties, it wasn’t, like, the thirties! I thought, “What is wrong with this place?” There was a blue one for adult group, a red one for children’s group, a pink one for private. As money came in, you were supposed to make change out of the appropriate little cash bag. I’d run out of change in one and have to borrow from another one and write a little sticky note and put it on this one. It was pathetic. (E. Moore interview 2005a)

To some, this “old-school” accounting signified “folksiness”; to others, incompetence.
I remember, going back to 1982, we had all the students’ enrollment records on cards, and the cards would be lost or they’d be incorrect, and people would be exasperated with us. It was funky, it was downhome, and it was stupid! I remember the first time we were gonna bring in a cash register, people were like, “[gasp] Are you serious? Won’t that change the feeling of the School?” Yeah [in sarcastic tone], we’ll actually be able to track the financial activity accurately. (Hirsch interview 2005)

The way that the staff interacted with each other and with customers needed to become more consistent. Hirsch approached this from a policy and procedure standpoint.

As we grew there were things that were becoming a little more formalized. There was a time when the administration was in the hands of just two people and there were only a few teachers. There weren’t really practices and policies per se. You know? But as we grew, those things became more formalized[....] How are we going to manage this when someone has a complaint? What are we going to do to try to provide incentives for people to come back? What do we know, when people don’t come back? Why are they not coming back? Well, let’s call ‘em up and ask ‘em. Let’s find out what it is. We went after that whole customer service side, to sort of understand our business a little better. (ibid.)

Attracting students also became a more consciously strategic endeavor, eventually developing into full-fledged marketing campaigns helmed by a marketing director. “Clearly success bred more success. And when you had 300 students, your opportunity for word of mouth was limited, and when you had 3,000 students, it was geometrically greater. And then I think we got smarter about incenting people to invite others. I mean, we just got better at it” (Hirsch interview 2005). Miles, meanwhile, took a more organic approach, seeking to nurture creativity among the teachers through cooperation.

I’d sit in on classes. I was also a big advocate of quality and spent a lot of time working with teachers, and creating workshops for teachers to get better at what they do. And that was because, you know, over time I was building—creating a staff of these people. I felt like pretty soon, the answers for all our miscellaneous issues were in the building, we just had to get the right people sitting at the table and ask them the right questions. And there was kind of no limit to what we could do. (Miles interview 2005a)
The return of acoustic music. Several social trends in Chicago and American society more broadly fed into the Old Town School’s rapid growth. The first was simply a return to an acoustic aesthetic in popular music tastes. Mainstream popular music in the 1980s had embraced electronic sounds; the keyboard synthesizer and drum machine had come into their own as viable musical instruments, facilitated by the MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) protocol introduced in 1982, the same year that compact discs first became commercially available, bringing music into the digital age. Guitars had hardly disappeared, but the dominant sound was the electric guitar. Perhaps it was a natural swing of the pendulum for listeners to crave a more organic, tactile sound again.

Michael Miles pinpoints the turning point at Tracy Chapman’s rise to popularity in 1988.

[T]he back of the music industry was broken by Tracy Chapman, when she released whatever her first song was. Because all of a sudden this very synthesized sound that had been where, a kind of in-human, or not in-human, but more mechanized production values in music. Then kind of out of nowhere comes this black woman singing by herself and playing an acoustic guitar and it makes its way all of a sudden onto the charts. (Miles interview 2005a)

Tracy Chapman’s eponymous first album with her self-penned, lyrically evocative songs supported by rhythmically strummed acoustic guitar—in other words, stylistically squarely in the singer-songwriter tradition rooted in the folk revival, though her race (she is African American) made her a minor anomaly—reached number one on the pop charts in 1988. Suzanne Vega, 10,000 Maniacs, and the Indigo Girls, similarly introspective artists whose recordings referenced an acoustic aesthetic, were also achieving mainstream popularity. Jim Hirsch was consciously following this shift as it was happening and remembers being influenced by books like John Naisbitt’s *Megatrends*, “about what was happening in the world. And one of the things that he said in that book was that the perfect antidote to the high-tech world is the high-touch culture of
folk music and folk arts” (Hirsch interview 2005). Hirsch did indeed have an instinctive sense of emerging tastes, identifying Ani di Franco’s popular potential early.

It became cooler again. “Folk.” Like we had Ani di Franco, for example, her first show in Chicago. Jim Hirsch saw her at some place in Canada, Winnipeg Folk Festival or something, and was like, “This is a singer-songwriter we are going to have at our school. No one has heard of her.” And the place was just packed with screaming girls. (E. Moore interview 2005a)

Meanwhile, Michael Miles focused on the guitar itself as the key indicator of change:

All of a sudden, things shifted. And acoustic guitars were making their way into popular culture again. The public will respond to what they have access to. And all of a sudden, the public is getting to hear acoustic guitars, and they’re thinking, “I could play an acoustic guitar.” So that was one, from an external source, of what was happening in the popular world that was contributing. (Miles interview 2005a)

Since guitar instruction had always been the Old Town School’s bread and butter, this was good news. “It was cool again, to have somebody playing acoustic guitar. So if you wait around long enough, things come back in style” (E. Moore interview 2005a). It is hard to overstate how significant this trend was to the fortunes of the Old Town School, though it took them a while to understand how to capitalize upon it fully.

One of the things we came to realize after about fifteen years was that probably the most important decision that we had to help people with is the decision to take guitar. Because once they got there, nine times out of ten they were going to come to us. So it was an interesting kind of market shift, where you started thinking about primary demand stimulation, rather than specific selling [of] your brand to somebody. The real issue is we need to increase the population of people who want to learn guitar, or learn this or that, because then they will naturally find us. (Hirsch interview 2005)

Luckily for the Old Town School, that population was increasing on its own.

World music. Hand in hand with this return to acoustic-based sounds echoing the 1960s folk revival came a growing interest in music from other parts of the world. The surge in interest in “world music” in the late 1980s into the 1990s originated in some of the same impulses as the
interest in “international” music of the 1950s and 1960s: an idealistic desire to bridge differences and resolve conflict through music; a curiosity about “the other”; and an extension of the folk music lover’s search for the authentic. But in the aftermath of the civil rights and decolonization struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and with the new communications technologies and transnational markets of the 1980s, this new passion for cultural diversity in music had new catalysts and implications.

For one thing, this time it became an actively promoted marketing category. Although the term “world music” had come into use earlier—often conflated with or subsumed within the activities and interests of ethnomusicologists—it did not gain popular currency until it became a marketing label, an event that apparently occurred in London in the summer of 1987 (so claims Philip Sweeney in *The Virgin Directory of World Music*, as quoted in Taylor 1997, 2). In the interest of promoting the growing number of records from Africa and other parts of the non-Euro-American world, record companies needed to develop a new label to stick on a literal bin in which to sell these records—the flexible sorting capabilities of Internet shopping still a decade away. It was “a trendier, less musty, less your-grandparents’-music category” than the term “international,” and encompassed “everything from field recordings made by ethnomusicologists to the latest in pop and rock from outside Europe and North America” (*ibid.,* 3). It was, however, thin on descriptive power; obviously, humanity has not yet encountered any music from beyond the category of “world.” The term’s survival for twenty years nonetheless testifies to its everyday usefulness—a usefulness that itself reveals the sustained biases and power relations within the world music audiences and distribution systems. Jocelyn Guilbault explains the double-edged nature of the categorization:

> To regulate and incorporate subordinate groups in the music industry, the dominant cultures have […] created a label. This in itself has helped confirm
their power to define the “others” and to level their differences and means of differentiation by framing them in a single category[….] At the same time, while many world musics may have seemed to confirm the central value of the mainstream language of popular musics, they have paradoxically attracted the attention of elite pop artists and led them to explore new aesthetics. World music seems far ahead of other fields in its use of active social forces that are diverse and contradictory as agents of change along with its reliance on both local and international forces in shaping local identities. (Guilbault 1993, 43)

The “elite pop artists” Guilbault refers to include Paul Simon, who brought the South African group Ladysmith Mambazo to international fame with the album *Graceland*, which hit number three on the Billboard pop charts in 1986, and David Byrne, who began incorporating Afro-pop and Brazilian samba into his music in the late 1980s. These popular successes, like that of Tracy Chapman at the same time, are relevant to the story of the Old Town School as evidence of both the growing interest in Afro-Latin sounds in particular, and opportunities for more people to develop curiosity about music from other places.

Locally, the Old Town School began providing such opportunities itself, not only for audiences to hear “world music,” but to play it as well. Capitalizing on the world music trend turned out to be another savvy business decision, another way to revitalize the musty old “folk” concept for a new generation.

I remember when Paul Simon had the *Graceland* album and everything, suddenly there was this world music thing. There was this ugly period—ugly only to some people who didn’t want anything to change—when Jim said, “We’re gonna jump right along on this interest in world music, because it’s all folk music, and who else is gonna do it better than we will? We’ll bring in all these different acts, not just singer-songwriter types”—who are white guys with guitars, let’s just face it[….] It really worked. Suddenly this was hip and cool and it wasn’t dorky and dumb any more. It never should have been dorky and dumb, you know what I mean, but in the ‘70s and ‘80s, folk music? You know? It just wasn’t that hip. But world music—world beat, Afro pop, Latin jazz—anything like that had that new cachet and all these pop musicians were using this kind of music. (Moore interview 2005a)
Jim Hirsch and Michael Miles expressed pride in how quickly they recognized and embraced the trend. Quite simply, “We were ahead of the game” (Miles interview 2005a). “I think it was kind of my thing,” Hirsch told me. He recognized the precedent for “a multicultural environment” from the early days of the School. “And you know, I just really liked the other kinds of music. That was partially it. But it was also, as I said earlier, that there were these unexploited audience segments out there, and just from a business standpoint, I just couldn’t not go after them” (Hirsch interview 2005). Again, Hirsch could frame his aesthetic instincts with market forces, and justify his decisions with financial success. Juan Dies, the first staff member to be hired specifically to work on diversity issues, agrees that this was fundamentally a business decision: “I think he enjoyed some of the music, he also had an artistic preference for some of it, but I don’t think he did it for any of the social justice reasons or anything like that, I don’t think. That was furthest from his mind” (Dies interview 2005).

The audiences Hirsch was targeting for “world music” concerts and classes were mostly white, middle-class, educated, and usually politically liberal—indeed, not demographically dissimilar to existing Old Town School audiences, and very much members of Florida’s creative class. What distinguished them was their desire to seek out musical and cultural novelty validated with the imprimatur of traditional authenticity—and they were probably younger. Timothy Taylor describes their quest as “sonic tourism,” not unlike earlier folk revivalists’ search for some deeper truth in a simpler time, but it was not “just a search for authentic sounds, but new sounds, musics and musicians unpolluted by the market system of the late capitalist west, and sounds more accessible and ignorable than the insistent and in-your-face and under-your-skin popular styles of the 1990s rap, hip-hop, grunge, punk, pop-punk and others” (Taylor 1997, 19). Hirsch coined his own term, “the culturally inquisitive,” for these audiences.
The culturally inquisitive can be—I think they’re primarily Caucasian, but you’ll see other groups kind of sprinkled in. But they’re people who are just into new experiences, and hearing the newest, coolest thing. So for a while, you had the phenomenon of what I called the “world music flavor of the month.” A fairly interesting group would tour, like I remember the—there was some women’s choir that toured, I think it was in the late eighties and early nineties—and they played big venues and they did huge business. Then they came back a year later, and nobody came out to see them. So, once the newness factor sort of wore off it, if there wasn’t something that really grabbed audiences and brought them back, you never saw the audience members return. (Hirsch interview 2005).

To serve this new market of “the culturally inquisitive,” the Old Town School began to build up its course offerings and concert line-up of non-North American traditions, drawing on the resources at hand. Miles had taken advice on outreach from visiting NEA representatives: that to expand into different kinds of ethnic music, you must be prepared to go out to them; they will not come to you. “That took me down lots of interesting places.” Miles became inspired by Chicago’s diversity to dig deeper.

It was my job to actually find musicians. And then bring them into the School. I mean, I didn’t really know anything about a number of these traditions that I ended up hiring people to teach, like African percussion, or Tunisian percussion, or flamenco dance, or Indian tabla, or Django Reinhardt guitar. I mean, you name it. All the stuff that’s there, it was my job to find those people. I didn’t really go out knowing exactly what I was looking for or even how to evaluate it. I just had my own sense of music based on my previous experiences, and communication based on my previous experiences (Miles interview 2005b).

He remembers visiting two Indian musicians in their basement apartment, one who played sitar and one who played tabla, only one of whom spoke English. Having no idea how to go about evaluating them or inviting them to teach, he brought his banjo, as he often did, to share his own music—“I could play with anybody, and it was a privilege to do so.” Another time, he was invited by a Sikh priest to his temple in a large room above a carpeting store at Devon and Western, “And here’s my friend, he looks like he came in off a flying carpet, turban, beautiful flowing grey hair, big grey beard. He plays the tablas and he was accompanied by a harmonium
player. Oh, my God, it was spectacular! They sang these beautiful, beautiful songs” (Miles interview 2005b).

It was a whirlwind tour of the-world-in-Chicago that Miles, and by extension, the Old Town School, was engaged in. It was indeed a form of “sonic tourism,” interpreted through a lens of enthusiasm for the different, but unlike the purely consumerist variety, at the Old Town School it was enhanced by face-to-face learning, interpersonal communication unmediated by technology. These musicians shared the same city with OTSFM students and audiences, their lives organized around the same Midwestern grid as everyone else’s, their personal histories parallel to those of the Americans’ parents and grandparents. For example, Miles hired a former member of the Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir (which was internationally popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s under the French title of their recordings, Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares) who was adjusting to a very ordinary Chicago lifestyle.

Whether we hit all the cultural protocols right at the start, I don’t know[...] but it was clear to us that here’s this amazing city that we live in, and Chicago’s an immigrant city and always has been, and, you know, my grandparents immigrated here in 1902. And all kinds of other people that come here looking for work, you know? Some of them come penniless, with a suitcase full of nothing, but their ears full of music, from all over the world. So it’s those people that I was privileged to seek out, and create ways that they could be comfortable. [...] There was a woman who--she was from Eastern Europe[...] In Bulgaria, She was a superstar. Here, she was nobody. I met her, and “Would you be willing to share what you have?” And she was this tiny woman, she was not five feet tall, and she couldn’t have weighed 100 pounds. And [chuckles] she would get up on stage and she would open her—it was like, you know, they have no vibrato, big, open-throat sound—my God, it was this huge sound, it was phenomenal! (ibid.) TL: So she taught here?

MM: She taught here, yeah. For a while. And of course, Bulgarian singing is not like a Beatles Ensemble, so there were only a handful of people, and I was only able to run the class for a little while, it didn’t go. She was married and she was working as a secretary, just trying to make a life and have a family. And they lived out in Elmhurst or something like that. (Miles interview 2005b)
It was, in fact, often hard to find teachers and styles of music that could be sustained as Old Town School classes. It had to be something that sparked initial student interest, had simple enough points of entry that it could be taught consistently with the School’s pedagogical commitment to “playing on the first day,” had to have at least some elements that could be mastered within an eight-week session, had to be taught by an individual with the extraordinary communication skills to teach across cultural and perhaps linguistic differences, and ultimately had to develop a student following strong enough to keep enrollment up. Very few traditions met these requirements, but many were sampled. Various percussion styles tended to be the most adaptable to the conditions at hand, including Latin percussion, Hawaiian percussion, Indian tabla, and, most sustainable, African drumming of various traditions; collectively, these allowed Miles to form a percussion department. The easiest entrée to “world music” instruction, however, was still dance, as it had been in the 1960s: recorded music could be used, no special equipment was required in most cases, and many dance styles could be simplified for beginners. Flamenco, hula, Irish step dancing, and belly dancing have been among the most popular and long-running dance classes since the 1990s, developing into mini-programs offering classes at several different levels, and, in the case of flamenco and hula in particular, integrating with instrumental instruction as well; tight-knit social groups have accordingly sprung up at the Old Town School around these traditions at different times.

*Strategies for racial and ethnic diversification.* Hirsch was interested in more than merely rejuvenating and enhancing the Old Town School’s existing “market,” however; he wanted to expand into completely new demographics.

I started in ’82, and I started reading census information. And one of the things that the census information in the early ‘80s was just chock full of was the incredible growth of the Hispanic segment of the population, the fact that the city
was very multicultural, and as I recall at the time, it was actually about maybe 35, 40% Caucasian, and the rest maybe a mix of African Americans, Asians, Latinos…. So I’m looking at these numbers and thinking, my God, this is an institution that is dealing with the traditional music of people, and it’s ignoring 65% of the people. By gosh, we have to start doing things that are relevant to other ethnicities and other racial groups. (Hirsch interview 2005)

In other words, the Old Town School needed to diversify not only its musical offerings, but also who they were being offered too if it was to survive into the twenty-first century. When Stracke and Hamilton had pursued ethnic and racial diversity in the 1950s and 1960s, it was a matter of political principle, social morality, and even aesthetic—not survival. The School carried on quite well as this priority slipped and folk music, whether as a genre of popular music or as a pastime, remained stubbornly white, by and large. By the end of the century, however, non-Hispanic whites were indeed only 42% of the Chicago population (2000 census), and, as Hirsch—along with much of corporate America—saw it, it was a simple matter of numbers and sustainability.

Jim was looking for a sustainable, a new audience that could bring money to the School. And he believed that they could. Now, corporate America was already thinking that way. They were thinking about products, you know, how do you market Pepsi to different ethnic markets. That was very much already going on in the corporate world. (Dies interview 2005)

One of the School’s earliest projects to reach new ethnic communities was the Festival of Latin Music, first held on three consecutive Saturdays in the summer of 1985, and annually thereafter until the turn of the millenium. The six concerts held in Broonzy Hall that year were attended by 1400 people all together—nearly a full house for each one—and some were broadcast on WBEZ radio. About half the audience had never been to OTSFM before, and about half were Hispanic. Musicians well known to many Hispanic Americans, including Flaco Jimenez and Lydia Mendoza, performed. Hirsch relied on networking to organize the event, with the Puerto Rican community proving especially helpful (Rand 1986).
I talked to a bunch of people in the Hispanic community, got a lot of advice, ‘cause I didn’t really know much about the music or who the good musicians were. And we identified some, we hired them, we marketed it so-so to the community and we put these festivals on. And lo and behold, Hispanic people came! Who’da thunk? (Hirsch interview 2005)

But, demonstrating a key element of Hirsch’s (and later, Dies’s) approach to diversification, it was not conceived of as a charitable outreach program, but in fact, with corporate sponsorships, turned “a tidy profit” (Rand 1986). The Festival of Latin Music became a long running success for the Old Town School, as one of the earliest major cultural events or institutions in Chicago to foreground Latin American cultures (the Chicago Latino Film Festival and the Mexican Fine Arts Museum both launched around the same time). But, as an annual event, there was only so much it could achieve in terms of actually integrating the Old Town School community.

What the School would see was, the School would be filled with Latinos for those days of the festival, and then those Latinos would leave, and they wouldn’t see them again. They didn’t take classes, or trickle into any of the other services of the School[…] Everyone was sort of pulled together to do that festival, and then they would go on to their other projects. (Dies interview 2005)

As suggested by the headcount above, the Festival of Latin Music attracted both Latino and non-Latino audiences, presumably including Hirsch’s “culturally inquisitive,” among others. In this way, this large event managed to serve as both “world music” and “multicultural outreach event.” Though on the surface it might seem that the two goals were compatible, in practice, the potential for any single program to serve both purposes was limited.

I think one of the lessons that we learned real, real fast was that if you want to engage audiences, you have to provide programming that has relevance for those audiences. The big holy grail that everybody for, like, two seconds tilted at was the notion that you could create crossover. And that just never happened. That if you had a Hispanic person come, they’d come back the next weekend to see Celtic music, or bluegrass? It just wasn’t interesting or relevant to them. (Hirsch interview 2005)
The term “world music” did not tend to resonate with Hispanic communities—certainly not in reference to their own music—and Hirsch was therefore careful not to market to them that way—and while a specific genre like Puerto Rican bomba might appeal to the culturally inquisitive as a novelty, it would not necessarily draw them more than once.

The Old Town School staff was not oblivious to the cultural politics involved, either—general issues of representation or concerns specific to a particular ethnic group—though they found they had a lot to learn.

Because then we were getting flat in the middle of issues like, well, did the Old Town School of Folk Music, which is basically a white organization, have a right to present and interpret the culture of our community? There were some very interesting and challenging exchanges with certain institutions and certain individuals, as we started to move more into those areas. And we had to be very careful to make sure that we didn’t do something that would really ruin our credibility with those groups. Or, inadvertently do something that was really stupid and culturally insensitive. And by the way, we did a few of those [smiling], but we managed to survive them. (Hirsch interview 2005)

To mitigate these potential conflicts, the staff learned to rely on certain individuals as cultural liaisons. For example, Billy Zayas, a local Puerto Rican radio host, musician, playwright, and scholar (among other talents), became an ally of the Old Town School, serving as a sort of “consultant or project advisor,” connecting it with the Puerto Rican community. Elisa Becker, a Jewish woman with close ties in the Chicago Bolivian community, helped write grants and bring in Bolivian participation (Dies interview 2005). Though ad hoc and voluntary, these arrangements were helpful in building longer-term relationship with specific minority communities and “to prove to those communities that we weren’t looking just for a real quickie, that what we were interested in was establishing a really long-term relationship with those audiences and those communities” (Hirsch interview 2005). Hirsch seems to have been quite
clear-sighted about how long it would take to create more than a token minority presence at the School, and steadily built on these first steps.

We went to the foundation world and we said, “Look, we want to really diversify the audience, we think there’s this great opportunity here. And by the way, you need to support this for ten or fifteen years, because that’s how long it’ll take to really do this work well.” And then the foundations responded very positively so it gave us venture capital. And with that venture capital, I was able to hire Juan because I knew that if we didn’t have somebody thinking about this 365 days a year, it wouldn’t work. (Hirsch interview 2005)

An internship was the natural first step to developing a new type of staff position; in 1990, Paul Tyler, who had just been hired to run the Old Town School Resource Center, was given the opportunity to hire a summer intern to help develop an exhibit on Guatemalan textiles. As an ethnomusicologist working on a Ph.D. from Indiana University’s Department of Folklore, Tyler naturally looked to his home department. Juan Dies, a Mexican graduate student there, saw Tyler’s ad in the student lounge “and said, ‘oh, this is perfect’” (Dies interview 2005). Dies had no connections to Chicago.

But, you know, it sounded exciting to be here. And I really did love Chicago that summer. You know, the pay was very minimal, and I was sleeping in a classroom. They had a cot that folded out. At the time, we used to put artists up in the classrooms[...]. And it was next to the El station, so the whole building would shake every time. Anyway, you know, I was ready for anything. So I lived on hot dogs in that room. (ibid.)

Guatemala was then in the midst of a long and devastating civil war, a divisive issue in U.S. politics as well as, of course, among Guatemalan communities in the U.S., which inspired the Old Town School to present a forum for artistic dialogue. “I think [Miles], he had more of a sense of the social justice end of things, and he also had an influence. You know, we always ended up doing programs on the hotspots of the world” (Dies interview 2005). Specifically, in the case of the Guatemalan textile exhibit, recognizing the divisions within the Guatemalan expatriot community in Chicago, Dies and Tyler were conscientious about reflecting the interests
of younger, politically liberal Guatemalans (who wanted to draw attention to current human
rights abuses in the country, displaying huipils with the bullet holes that had killed their
wearers), older immigrants (who had a more nostalgic desire to focus on beauty, with a regional
fashion show), and at least one Mayan Indian (who demonstrated weaving and expressed the
desire of the indigenous people to be left in peace)—musical performances were also a part in
the event. The exhibit a success, Juan Dies was warmly invited to keep OTSF in mind when
he graduated. Sure enough, by the time he completed his Master’s degree, the School had
garnered funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Joyce Foundation “to create
a full-time position for someone to oversee that process that had only been dealt with
sporadically during those special festivals” (Dies interview 2005).

Dies joined the staff as the Director of Community Outreach in 1993; “my job boiled
down to increasing ethnic clientele. That was my job description.” The only thing he didn’t like
about it coming in was its title, because the “outreach” concept was often equated with “charity
for minorities.”

Well, the way it was—the outreach for most other organizations was bussing kids
in for free programming, the minority kids in for free programming. And I was
really involved in more of a business development for the School. And I really
bought into that aspect of it. Because I think it was less condescending of
minorities. I think it was completely fair to ask for the communities to support
the programs because these audiences were already supporting other industries in
Latin music. Concerts at the Aragon, $40 tickets, you know. To think that, “oh,
this is a minority program. Let’s price it at $5 instead.” I thought it was
condescending and I didn’t like—I didn’t have anything against the School
having reduced pricing and scholarships and things like that, but not ethnically
specific. (Dies interview 2005)

At first, though, the ethnicities targeted were not all that specific. The School had
determined that Chicago’s Latinos and African Americans were the two priorities (setting aside
all other ethnic groups for the time being) but together, that was a population of over two million
people. Dies’s first project was actually with Chicagoans of African descent, a successful celebration of the Haitian emancipation bicentennial—like the Guatemalan exhibit, this was a “hot spot” in the wake of Aristide’s election and ouster—for which the Old Town School booked the world beat group Boukman Eksperyans and collaborated with the DuSable Museum of African American History. But thereafter, he was much more successful at developing Latino audiences and effectively set aside African Americans altogether for a few years.

By 1995, Dies had begun to implement the key elements that would drive Latino participation up through the 1990s and into the 2000s: a student survey and a concert series called La Peña. In order to measure success, or lack thereof, and be able to report it in concrete terms to funders, he began taking a simple survey at each of his events. The questions and the means evolved over time, but essentially this survey gathered basic ethnic/racial self-categorizations for all audience members, as well as contact information so as to stay in touch with them through direct mailings. La Peña was Michael Miles’s idea. “It was too ambitious a project for a novice like me to have come up with, you know, to say, ‘I wanna have a concert every Wednesday night free to the community.’ I thought Jim would just kick me out the door, saying, ‘Are you insane?’ But Michael Miles thought of it and said, ‘Yeah, you can pull it off’” (Dies interview 2005). Beginning in September of 1995, once a week from ten to midnight, Dies would host a performance by a local group and/or an Old Town School teacher, representing a specific style or tradition of Latin American music, preceded by an open mic (the original connotation of the term “peña”) that was eventually phased out. Once established, La Peña was regularly drawing an audience of 120 per week at the Armitage location; after the move, attendance doubled. OTSFM classes were always promoted at these events, and a couple of Spanish language courses were developed. These efforts bore fruit; between 1994 and 1997, the
number of minority students tripled, and Latinos constituted the largest part of this growth. (OTSFM 1997).

_The youngest demographic._ Another significant catalyst for growth during the 1990s was the Old Town School’s discovery of an entirely new market: babies—or rather, their parents, who began enrolling in the Wiggleworms program in droves. In 1985, Kathy Lahiff started offering a music class for infants, inspired by some coursework she’d done in the Orff method of teaching music, which emphasizes children’s physical engagement as the means to internalize music. The basic Wiggleworms concept was (and still is) to bring a group of parents and their infants or toddlers together, divided by age group, and to provide a social atmosphere for making music under the guidance of a competent musician who was also (ideally) an early childhood educator, though in the early years the classes were often taught by guitar teachers who simply liked children. The children would engage with the music by singing, playing simple instruments (rattles and tambourines and the like), and simply listening to the teacher and their parents; parents, meanwhile, would learn age-appropriate songs and gain confidence in singing for their children.

At first, its potential was not understood by most of the other staff, according to Sandy Lucas, Wiggleworms teacher since 1988 and Children’s Program Director in the early 1990s. It started out like, “Yeah, yeah go ahead and do this,” but maybe people didn’t quite get it[…. It took on a life of its own. It was a success waiting to happen. But it was like, “What are all these kids doing here?” and “Oh, we don’t want fingerprints on the walls!” You know, how about changing tables in the adult bathrooms, including in the men’s bathroom because of the dads? You know, how about spending a little on advertisement? Recording a Wiggleworms CD, tape[….] It sort of was a little side thing, they thought. Then people realized, “Oh this is really valuable, this is really a piece now of who we are.” So I really watched the whole thing unfold, and I feel really blessed in that. But it was like, “What are you doing with the colored paper? What’s going on here? What do you mean you want a rug in the room? What do you mean you’re sitting on the floor? What? Huh?” All that took a lot of time. (Lucas interview 2005)
Jim Hirsch admits that he was taken by surprise by its success.

Wiggleworms was the right program at the right time in the right place for the right people. And I will take almost no credit for that[.....] By the way, I came up with that name. Which I stole from a thing in Michigan, actually, to be perfectly honest about it. And it was Wiggleworms that was the grand slam. And it was just an accident, that was just dumb luck. Maybe not on Kathy’s part, but, I mean, I never saw the potential of it. (Hirsch interview 2005)

In the early 1990s, the Wiggleworms program took off and began doubling and tripling in size. I was a timely offering that parents the vanguard of the burgeoning creative class, college-educated baby boomers now beginning to reproduce, were poised to take advantage of. That the parents attending Wiggleworms were a likeminded, interconnected group was clear from the way the word was spread.

The thing that was cool about it is that Wiggleworms went viral. The parents network—you know, that kind of six degrees of separation among all parents with children, newborn children. It just went through it like a disease. The interesting thing, when something goes truly viral—it’s like buying an MP3 player today. You know, it’s like, of course you buy an iPod, because it’s the branded one. Well, we became the branded children’s program. So we were just really lucky, like I said. But it was a good program. And then of course all the research came out about the “Mozart effect,” which just added to the fun. (Hirsch interview 2005)

Wiggleworms was and continues to be a cornerstone of the Old Town School’s financial success, its income subsidizing less popular programs. As Hirsch pointed out, “It wasn’t [just] self-supporting. It was profitable” (ibid.).

A New Old Town School

The staff and Board began to come to terms with this unprecedented growth after the remodel of the Armitage building, and were already looking for new spaces by the early 1990s. “Of course our original idea was to stay in the neighborhood because that was where our
customers were used to coming and that was where our comfort level was,” Hirsch recalled; at first they focused on the vicinity of Lincoln Park, looking only as far as Lakeview, a couple of miles to the north, until late 1993 when the City presented offered an intriguing possibility in the northwestern neighborhood of Lincoln Square.

And then out of the blue, I got a call from the Department of Cultural Affairs one day, and said there’s a building up in Lincoln Square. We’re interested in seeing if you want us to give this building to you. I thought, What? You’re going to give us a building? And oh, by the way, there’s $1.3 million of money left to help build it out in a bond thing. Well, all right, I’m interested, you got my attention. (Hirsch interview 2005)

Once the staff had determined that the building was “dynamite,” the Old Town School began pursuing the old Hild Library Building in earnest. Elaine Moore remembers that OTSFM was actually in competition with were two other organizations that wanted it (E. Moore interview 2005a). Real estate attorney Scott Hargadon, then taking classes at the School, volunteered his legal services and took care of the negotiations with the City and all the legal issues that arose over the next three years (OTSFM 1998). In the end, the School made a “sweetheart deal” with the City, who sold the building plus land for parking lots for a token price, in addition to contributing about $2 million to the project (Hirsch interview 2005).

To cover the nine million dollars the move would eventually cost, a capital campaign was launched in 1994. Donations from wealthy donors and ordinary supporters alike were pursued by Hirsch and Board members (some of whom had been newly recruited for their fundraising potential), grants were garnered, and benefit performances were held. Peter Yarrow, veteran of the popular Folk Boom group Peter, Paul and Mary, played an especially critical fundraising role. Although he had not really had any involvement with the Old Town School before participating in a 1995 benefit concert for an ailing Bob Gibson hosted by the School, “he thought of us as one of ‘his offspring.’ Which was nice. And what he did for us was amazingly
generous and amazingly important and impactful” and he was inspired by Hirsch’s pitch (Hirsch interview 2005).

And what he did was he came into Chicago throughout the next couple of years and allowed us to hold these small dinners where we were able to invite very high-profile Chicagoans to come, and Peter would play “Puff the Magic Dragon” and we’d have a lovely dinner at somebody’s two-million-dollar house, and at the end of it Peter would say, “You know, I really care about this organization. I’m involved, and we want you to be involved.” And through those dinners—and there were probably six or seven of them—we were able to recruit a number of very high-profile Board members to the organization. And we probably raised three, four million. (ibid.)

On the occasion of OTSF M’s fortieth anniversary in late 1997, a tribute concert to the late Chicago singer-songwriter Steve Goodman was held at the Medinah Temple on the Near North Side. John Prine, Lyle Lovett, Jackson Brown, Emmylou Harris, Arlo Guthrie and others performed for no fee, raising nearly half a million dollars for the School, its most successful fundraiser ever (OTSFM 1997a).

At the time of the move, the School had 1000 to 1300 adult students per session “squished into 909 Armitage and the six classrooms of the annex at 939 Armitage, two of which were actually kitchens. Space was so scarce that the administrators had to clear their offices at five o’clock to make room for classes” (G. Tyler interview 2005). The move was clearly necessary, but there was still a lot of anxiety about leaving Lincoln Park: would all those students actually follow?

The decision, which was just unbelievably frightening, to move the main operations up to Lincoln Square, which nobody knew anything about, it felt like it was in a different world. That was huge. And then, the related decision to keep the Armitage building, which we arrived at through research. The way that came about, the original idea was just to move everything up to Lincoln Square, but then we starting doing some audience research and some surveys[….] (Hirsch interview 2005)
That research could have been conducted by an outside consulting firm—as had been done at least twice before—but it seemed time to have a marketing specialist on staff. Many new staff were hired in the 1990s, but the hiring of Gail Tyler as Director of Marketing, along with Juan Dies as Director of Community Outreach (discussed above) and Colleen Miller as Concert Manager (see Chapter 6) arguably had the most significance in shaping Chicago’s perception of the Old Town School’s and bringing its image into the next century. “She [Tyler] made huge contributions to how we did stuff,” Jim Hirsch acknowledged (Hirsch interview 2005).

Gail Tyler first came to the Old Town School in the early 1990s to take fiddle lessons, joining the Old Time Ensemble when she could play well enough (a class taught by Paul Tyler, her future husband). As she got more involved, she began to feel very committed to both the music and the institution. With an MBA from New York University, fifteen years of experience in the corporate world, and an intensity and drive commensurate with that background, she was a natural match for the new position of Marketing Director. She was hired in December 1996, forming a marketing staff with Advertising Director Bob Medich and to a certain extent Juan Dies, and in the eighteen months before the new building opened, she helped secure major funding from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Foundation for audience development. The three-year project’s proposed goals included increasing and broadening the course offerings, increasing the number of concerts, increasing minority enrollment by two percent per year, and increasing overall enrollment and concert attendance by about ten percent annually. Funds were also requested for educational outreach in public schools and senior centers and for the hiring of new staff (OTSFM 1997b).

This grant enabled Tyler to complete a comprehensive student body motivational study, the first of its kind at the Old Town School. The leadership was very concerned that the School
would lose a significant number of students in the move to a new neighborhood; Tyler’s task was not only to estimate that anticipated loss, but also to assess what was important to students about the School. Of the 612 respondents—an astonishing 85% of whom had started at the Old Town School only since 1995—nearly half indicated that their decision to take another class would not be affected by the move, while about 30% imagined they would be less likely to continue in the new location. Twenty-three percent felt they would be more likely to take classes in Lincoln Square, mostly due to the convenience. Interestingly, of the mere 6% of the respondents who had been coming to the School since before 1990, more than half said the move would deter them from continuing—could this have been in nostalgic resistance to leaving the old space? In practice, however, Tyler estimates that only 2% of students overall did not return, with a dramatic influx of new enrollments on top of the old (G. Tyler interview 2005). The encouraging results of this survey tipped general sentiment at the Old Town School in favor of the move.

And the student surveys had some really interesting results. The one that I recall very clearly was that people basically wrote in comments above the highest level of support that we had listed that basically indicated “we would go wherever you went. What you provide to our lives is so important, you could be on the moon and we’d figure out how to get there once a week.” Wow. There’s a level of consumer involvement that was interesting. And gave us a lot of confidence. So from that, we determined we could probably do the move without just destroying the student base. We sort of assumed that we would pick up some people from around that area just because it would be much more convenient. So seeing the research results really helped us deal with our anxieties about it. (Hirsch interview 2005)

Another thing that helped to allay anxieties was the decision not to sell the Armitage building, but to devote it to the children’s programs. “We saw from the surveys that the kids program was extremely geographically sensitive,” Hirsch recalls—parents were much less likely to take their children outside the neighborhood for Wiggleworms or (for older kids) lessons
A little number crunching showed that both buildings could be maintained. “And then when we figured we could also keep the Armitage building, then the whole thing made a whole lot more sense because it gave us a fallback position. So if the whole thing just blew, we could always retrench back to Armitage and just go on being the nice old little loveable Old Town School“ (Hirsch interview 2005).

A flurry of attention from the local and even national media attended the grand opening of the Old Town School at 4544 North Lincoln in 1998. Launched by the first annual Folk and Roots Festival held in July in Welles Park, just down the street from the new building (see Chapter 6) and sustained by a volley of press releases, the opening culminated on the weekend of September 18 to 20, which began with a gala benefit concert in the new facility headlined by “folk legends” Joni Mitchell and Peter Yarrow, with the shocking ticket price of $2,500, “filled with successful baby boomers who no doubt thirty years ago were young folkies in long hair and beads” (Houlihan-Skilton 1998). The full house alone is testimony to Richard Florida’s “creative class” theory; the free-thinking, counter-cultural fans of the 1960s folk revival had become the establishment, benefactors of its continuation into the next century.

Hirsch said he knows this doesn’t sound much like the Old Town School, which has put a premium on opening the doors to everyone at very little expense. But money is money, and the more of it Old Town can collect on its opening, the more it will be able to spend on programs and classes. “It’s something we need to do,” Hirsch said. (Madigan 1998)

At the same time, however, opening with such a restricted event was an invitation to resentment (expressed to me off the record) among the teachers, staff and volunteers who had worked so hard to bring the School to this point—for little to no income. Saturday evening featured Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, Steve Earle, and Todd Snider, folk and singer-songwriter acts of a more contemporary vintage (Steve Earle was a last-minute replacement for
British musician Richard Thompson [Kot 1998])—at presumably a more reasonable ticket price, given the not-yet-legendary status of the performers. The weekend wrapped up Sunday afternoon with an “Old Town Reunited” event, more in the spirit of typical OTSFM commemorative events, in which “Old Town School friends past and present” performed, including Frank Hamilton, Fred Holstein, Ella Jenkins, Bonnie Koloc, Corky Siegel, Special Consensus (OTSFM teacher Greg Cahill’s twenty-year-old bluegrass quartet), Sons of the Never Wrong (an eclectic, Chicago-based folk-pop trio), and several others. Unlike past reunions, however, this one was filmed and edited down for broadcast on WTTW, the local public television station, as part of an hour-long special on OTSFM history (OTSFM 1998, Ferri 1998).

Throughout, under the umbrella of “The Old Town School of Folk Music,” 4544 North Lincoln was introduced as the new “Chicago Folk Center,” while 909 West Armitage was billed as the “Children’s Center”— names which stuck not at all. The reasoning was sound enough; the Chicago Folk Center was to be a multifarious place, including not only extensive classroom and studio facilities for education, but also the new concert hall, the Different Strummer music store, the Resource Center and the Café, all of it adult-centered, while the children’s curriculum was to remain in Lincoln Park. It soon became apparent that there was demand for kids’ classes and lessons in Lincoln Square as well, however, and for evening adult classes at Armitage, and the Children’s Center concept dissolved. Although the new building did perform the synthesis of activities more or less as imagined, the “Chicago Folk Center” name was also dropped within a year, because “Old Town School” was simply the familiar name; “it was too confusing” (Roche interview 2005b).
Redefining the “F-word”

“So what do you think of the ‘F’ word?” Gail Tyler remembers being asked by Jim Hirsch at her first interview for the marketing director job. “‘Folk’” (G. Tyler interview 2005). By the 1990s, the word had become a touchstone for the debate on what the Old Town School could and should become. The tensions between the discourses of the humanistic ethos of the folk revival on the one hand, with its organic metaphors and anti-modern desires, and post-industrial market capitalism on the other, with its equation of growth with success and its bottom-line orientation, coalesced in anxiety over the term “folk music.”

The term “folk music” generally summoned up associations of “white people with long hair, wearing sandals and strumming a guitar” (Johnson & Associates 1993)—the idealistic folkies of a generation earlier, or Elaine’s “white guys with guitars”—images that were compelling to relatively few Chicagoans in the 1990s, certainly not to most people of color. “Folk music is what people think of as [sings archly] ‘I gave my love a cherry….’ In fact, no one likes it really,” Elaine Moore recalled of attitudes at the time. “We were going to be thought of as this old place stuck in the Folk Scare of the fifties and sixties, you know? And so that’s what I think they were worried the connotation was” (E. Moore interview 2005a). The use of the word “folk” was thus seen as being a barrier to the new goals of expanding offerings and audiences, specifically of increasing racial and ethnic minority involvement.

To better address this issue, Jim Hirsch hired the consulting firm Johnson & Associates in 1993 to “learn more about the behavior, perceptions and needs of these target audiences [i.e., African Americans and Hispanics]” (Johnson & Associates 1993, 1). “I thought the funniest consultant was a group that did this big study, and they came back after their $18,000 or whatever it was—it seemed outrageous at the time—to tell us that black people didn’t like folk
music. Well, I could’ve told you that! Gimme a break!” (E. Moore interview 2005a). However commonsensical the report’s conclusions may have been, it is revealing even today to have the responses of the six Hispanic and African American focus groups in writing. The fifty-eight adult participants were sorted into groups by ethnic/racial identity and according to whether or not they had ever been to the Old Town School (either for instruction or a performance).

Regarding the term folk, the report concluded that “it is all too clear that the phrase ‘folk music’ doesn’t just say what the school does, it implies to ‘outsiders’ all that it doesn’t do (i.e., serve as an outlet or source of expression for the music traditions of many cultures)

[….U]nitiated respondents perceive the mission of OTSFM to be stuck in time” (Johnson & Associates 1993, 12). One male African American respondent explained, “They have a very serious problem and that’s the title itself. This creates a perception in the minds of Black people when you say folk music that someone is sitting around listening to guitar music and singing.” A male Hispanic respondent said bluntly, “You think of white America as folk music” (ibid., 30). Some of the respondents also had a negative reaction to the neighborhood associated with the School—both the “Old Town” of the name and the School’s then-current location in central Lincoln Park. “By it being called Old Town it’s kind of geared to a certain audience—the Yuppies,” a male Hispanic participant said. “That’s what they’re into (folk music). We’re not” (ibid., 31). When those who had never been to OTSFM were asked “how they might feel going into the OTSFM building as they might imagine it to be, the consensus was…‘Uncomfortable’” (ibid., 33).

The report did find, however, that to some focus group members, “folk music” had a secondary, more positive connotation they could identify with if the context were shifted a bit. The consultants found that these alternate associations came up only indirectly; African
Americans might think of blues or songs from Africa as “folk music,” while college-educated Hispanics would summon associations of *folclorico* presentations of dance and music from various Latin American countries, and this connection did inspire some curiosity about the Old Town School, especially after learning a little more about its current programming. “Both segments considered folk music to be the story-telling music of the deep South (like blues or spirituals) or the Latin countryside” (Johnson & Associates 1993, 6). Overall, the strongest recommendation from the focus group participants and thus the consultants was to change the name and thus clarify the School’s intended purpose.

While OTSFM’s expanded mission may be clear to those managing or already entrenched in the operations of the school, it has not been effectively communicated or positioned to the public, especially in African-American and Hispanic communities. The school’s own nomenclature has created a level of cognitive dissonance to non-European, non-white communities—“folk music” and “cultural diversity” are not consistent in their minds. (*ibid.*, 12)

“That was interesting to hear,” Michael Miles recalled. A contentious debate ensued—or, more accurately, a recurring debate was fueled—and, not for the first or last time, changing the School’s name was seriously considered. But because of the dramatic transformation promised by the move to Lincoln Square in the mid-nineties, the Board and staff probably came closer to actually changing it then than at any other time. “We were talking about it at the time of the move—should we just leave folk out of it?” (E. Moore interview 2005a). Gail Tyler defended the name from a marketing perspective. She remembers voicing her opinion right away in her first interview with Hirsch:

[Jim said,] “We have an ongoing discussion about dropping ‘folk’ from the name because blah-blah-blah.” I said, “You can’t do that. It’s your brand name. It’s been your brand name for fifty years. And plus, then you’d be the Old Town School of…Music, and you know, everybody’s the Something School of Music. It’s the one unique characteristic.” I would fall on my sword over that. (G. Tyler interview 2005)
It was not marketing or business concerns so much as a commitment to the core educational mission of the School, however, that guided the final decision. Dies remembered, “Jim and I had a conversation [about the name change], and Jim said, ‘No. This is what we are. This is who we’ve been. And they just need to know us, they need to know what we do. They need to learn, we have to re-educate our audiences about what folk means.’ It’s a bold step” (Dies interview 2005). It was bold, and risky, given how clearly Hispanics and African Americans had articulated their distaste over “folk” in the Johnson study, and how, even among white audiences, “folk music” had proven to be such a cyclical trend. Rather than react to that reality, Jim Hirsch and his team decided to create for Chicago a new concept of folk music.

This move is described by sociologist Kerry Dobransky, in a study of the Old Town School, as “embodied identification,” where what he calls tradition-bearing organizations “attempt to equate themselves with the tradition they bear, so that the organization is no longer simply the protector of the tradition; rather it is the tradition” (2007, 243). In addition to ongoing efforts to identify the School with folk music history (through commemorative events and other exercises of collective memory) and to identify it with folk music of the present (through the legitimization of the NEA, for example), Dobransky argues that OTSFM also worked to establish a rhetorical equivalence between itself and folk music: “the success of the OTS was the success of the folk music tradition” (ibid., 249). Hirsch consistently used this strategy in press releases, as in: “We are delighted that the MacArthur Foundation has chosen once again to support folk music in the city of Chicago”—when the Foundation had actually chosen to support the Old Town School specifically (quoted in Dobransky 2007, 250).
Though seemingly manipulative, the desire to promote “folk music” as an inclusive and diverse field of expressive activity, vaguely bounded by a sense of community origins and a process of participation, was consistent with the inclusive ideals of not only Jim Hirsch and Michael Miles, but those of Frank Hamilton and Win Stracke as well. It was also successful. The Old Town School’s attempt to de-stigmatize their name has certainly worked among college-educated whites and has made progress among Hispanics and other ethnic groups, judging from in-house demographic surveys, though apparently not as much among African Americans, who were still dramatically underrepresented at the time of my fieldwork.

Marketing concerns were only the tip of a much deeper contradiction growing at the heart of the Old Town School, however. Jim Hirsch saw it as a necessary and productive balance:

One of the interesting dichotomies about the School is that it was always this very high-touch, you know touchy-feely thing from the outside, but I tried to make it as high-tech, as management-oriented, as improvement-oriented as possible from the inside as we could. I mean, the mantra was, daily incremental improvement. When people look at us from the outside, it should be funky and mellow and this and that, but inside, you’d better fucking be able to do it. Because if you’re not, you’re not going to last. It was a very success-focused and success-driven culture, on the management staff. (Hirsch interview 2005)

While reviewing my interview with Jim Hirsch, I was struck at how he himself—more specifically, his use of language—embodied that contradiction, yet he ironically did not see it as one. The following exchange occurred directly after the quote above:

TL: I’m glad you’ve brought that up so pointedly, because that is something I’ve been seeing all along. I mean through my involvement, and then looking back at least through your period. And that seems to me both a balance and a tension. Would you agree with that?

JH: No. I don’t see the tension part at all. If you understand what the core values are, and you adhere to those, then your job is to create the tightest, best structure to deliver on those values and to fulfill your mission and to meet your customers’ expectations as best you possibly can. You know, people don’t care about that stuff, unless it becomes so overwhelming that it kind of blocks out the other stuff. It’s not hard to make sure it doesn’t block out the other stuff, you just have to
keep your eye on it. And know who you are and where you wanna go. I never felt any tension with that. *(ibid.)*

On the one hand, as someone who has run (much smaller) organizations myself, I completely agree with him, and he was probably right that the average guitar student or Wiggleworms mom coming through the door benefited from the efficiency through easier access.

The discourse that Hirsch and others on the management team began using, however, reveals an ethos in direct conflict with the folk revival-based ethos in which the Old Town School is rooted. Hirsch and just about everyone else I spoke to from this period stated a commitment to inclusive music-making in every sense, and to music with meaningful roots in oral tradition. They generally tended to assume a concept of “the people” (though they rarely used that expression—“folks” was actually slightly more common), similar to Frank Hamilton’s. Jarringly, however, the resistance to capitalism and belief in egalitarianism that usually accompanies this discourse of “the people” slipped in favor of the embrace of post-industrial market capitalism. The reasoning behind this was quite simple and practical: survival and sustainability. “All the good ones are run like businesses. And I don’t mean the good folk music schools, ‘cause there ain’t too many of those—I mean the good not-for-profits” *(Hirsch interview 2005)*. Hirsch’s own vocabulary was a striking juxtaposition of terms straight out of business school—students, audiences and even funders were “consumer groups” and “target groups,” the children’s classes were “a huge profit center,” minority ethnic and racial groups were new “markets” to be “exploited,” Latin music was a “product” for Hispanic audiences—while the content of his speech, what he was using these words to describe, was inclusive, participatory music making, valued for its affective influence on people’s personal and social lives—things which fundamentally cannot be quantified, rationalized, or reduced to a bottom line.

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Departures

The new capacity and potential generated by the Old Town School’s latest transformation of its space catapulted its numbers upwards, just as the 1987 remodel had. The surge in visibility and funding, along with the possibilities afforded by the new space let to even faster growth; the budget nearly doubled between 1997 and 1999, from about $3 million to $6 million (the School drew a surplus each year throughout the 1990s), while between 1998 and 1999, adult enrollment increased by 30% and children’s enrollment by 36% (OTSFM 1997, 1999).

All was not well within the School, however. Since before the move, tensions had been building among the staff—amongst the administrative staff, and between them and the teachers. According to Elaine Moore, “It was a really ugly, toxic atmosphere. Really bad. I left,” as well as “a whole slew of admin people.” She recalls a sense of “us-and-them” building at times to “actual animosity,” and that “people always used to call [the realm of the administrators] ‘upstairs,’ even though the teachers taught upstairs and the office was downstairs [at Armitage]” (E. Moore interview 2005a). Other teachers told me off the record that they resented Hirsch’s attitude towards the teachers and felt more and more like second-class citizens, paid at a low rate to provide the Old Town School’s “product.” Few if any teachers were employed full-time (though of course many did not wish to teach more than a few hours a week), and only slightly more received benefits like health insurance. A movement in the early to mid-1990s to start a union for the teachers was unsuccessful and doubtless contributed to the growing atmosphere of distrust. In addition, as the School began to run on a more professional model, there was a growing debate on standardization and even packaging and distribution of the curriculum. The school seemed to be in danger of turning the corner to becoming a corporate and academic entity first, and a folk community second.
Moore left before the move—she could not recall the date—when the negative atmosphere became too much for her. “Jim offered me a much better job, and a big raise, but it was at the expense of other people on the staff, and it just made me sick. So I quit anyway. I was so relieved.” She remained on good terms with Hirsch personally and stayed on with the School, but only as a teacher; she has never returned to any kind of administrative position, though it can be difficult to stay out of the decision-making arena: “I have to bite my tongue all the time, feel like I want to butt in and tell everybody what to do. But I haven’t” (E. Moore interview 2005a). Michael Miles was next to leave. In 1998, around the time of the move, he fell ill with heart trouble and took a leave of absence from which he did not return, except as a part-time teacher, though he was strongly considered for the position of executive director in 2000 (Tomasello interview 2005a).

In 1999, Jim Hirsch’s wife Michelle, who had been finance director for more than a decade, was asked to resign; according to Marjorie Craig Benton, president of the Board at the time, “the board thought it unwise for an organization as large as the Old Town School to have two relatives in key positions” (Lazare 2000). Elaine Moore acknowledges the awkwardness of that situation: “but before that, it was always really hard. Because the two of them were married, and they held the two big positions at the school, and it just was a bad set-up. And I would go in and tell him! It’s not like I never told him this. And he knew it. That’s the thing. It was unfortunate” (E. Moore interview 2005a). Jim then took a nine-week leave of absence, claiming he’d planned to do that all along upon completion of the capital campaign and the move (Lazare 2000).

It is hard to present clearly the facts of Jim Hirsch’s final departure, as the few frank comments people made to me about it were made off the record. As I jotted down in my field
notes after my first interview with Elaine, “We talked a little off record about the tension during the later Jim Hirsch years. Sounds pretty unpleasant. Too bad no one wants to really bitch on record. I guess that in and of itself is representative of the ‘culture’ here” (Field notes for May 3, 2005). Although the Old Town School was no stranger to pettiness, conflict, and even some vitriol and backstabbing (or so I have easily gathered from unguarded comments and anecdotes), there is an ingrained habit not to speak badly of people (at least on the record), but to move on once the dust has settled and avoid stirring it up again. I believe this is because the people who are there truly love the School. As for Hirsch himself, all he would tell me is, “There’s really nothing to say.” (Hirsch interview 2005a).

Hirsch announced his resignation to OTSFM staff April 26, 2000, and had cleaned out his desk and left within hours. To the media, he described his departure as “completely amicable.” He went on to explain, “For the last year I had been thinking about what I wanted to do with the next phase of my life after reaching my goals at the school”—and yet, the Chicago Reader journalist noted, this statement was belied by the fact that he could not say what kind of job he would be seeking next, or even the field it would be in. Newly elected board president Howard Green reported “that Hirsch and the board agree on a quick, low-key exit” (Lazare 2000). It is reasonably clear that the decision was the Board’s, not Hirsch’s, nor does it seem to have been catalyzed by circumstances with the staff, however contentious the relations. “I can’t say [what went wrong] because the Board decided something went wrong. And none of us ever had much connection with the Board[….] Because he raised $10 million for this building! There must have been such serious—don’t you think? For somebody to do such a great job, and for them to seriously feel that they wanted to fire him” (E. Moore interview 2005a).
Ultimately, the School had simply outgrown Jim Hirsch. He had pursued so single-mindedly the goal of professionalizing and expanding the institution from a scruffy, seat-of-the-pants operation to a corporation (“Do you see it as a business?” I asked him. “Of course,” he replied. “It’s a 501(c)3 corporation”). His job had gone from a nearly one-man-show, where he had had a hand in the day-to-day operations of every aspect of the organization, to helming a complex institution where all but the largest decisions and public roles had been delegated to a small army of administrators—some of whom had more specialized formal training than he had. Possibly the shift in leadership style that was required as a consequence was not coming naturally to him, contributing to the general discontent on the staff (though this is pure speculation on my part). The Board, which he had worked so hard to develop by recruiting people with more influence and resources, had escaped his influence, as well.

When he left, I knew there had been, over the course of several years, tribulations with the Board. And that’s the funny thing, is he wanted to build up a board—and successfully. You need these people. Powerful and really good board members. And then he didn’t get along with the Board any more. ‘Cause he was the boss, and sometimes there’d be trials and tribulations among the administrative staff, and I’d be like, we could go to the Board, but Jim is in charge of this place, you know? The Board didn’t seem to be that effective. But then he made the Board more and more effective. And it’s sort of like this tragic story, because he leaves! (E. Moore interview 2005a)

Jim Hirsch’s fundamental strategy of expansion had also reached a point of unsustainability. According to Jimmy Tomasello, once the expansion into Lincoln Square was accomplished, Hirsch almost inevitably started looking further: “we got this place, and he just wanted to keep going. He was talking about franchising and this and that. And the board said, ‘Nah, nah. Let’s make this place really special’” (Tomasello interview 2005a). There was tremendous anxiety among Old Town School regulars that the massive expansion that had already occurred would alter the fundamental character of the place irrevocably; it seemed
beyond question that to franchise it in other cities would sacrifice its uniqueness and make it nothing more than a commercial entity. Fortunately, the Board agreed with that sentiment. The Chicago Reader story cited above ended with a comment from an anonymous executive “at a major philanthropic organization”: “‘Jim’s genius was that he ran the school like a real business.’ Unfortunately, business is business” (Lazare 2000).

However “amicable” his resignation may (or may not) have been, it was no doubt extremely painful to Jim Hirsch personally; his life had revolved around the Old Town School for more than twenty years, and to some observers, he was the Old Town School. In my interview with him five years later, I felt that the topic still touched a raw nerve with him, which he was coping with through philosophical detachment—at least, that’s how I interpreted his noncommittal, almost defensive posture on this line of questioning. In all the time I spent at the Old Town School, I only saw Jim in the building once, at a memorial concert for Ray Nordstrand, but he left at intermission. I asked him how he saw his legacy.

I believe that it’s one of the truly great not-for-profits of the United States. And I’m very proud of the role that I played, along with all the other people that I’ve worked with. I don’t know…legacy. You know, it was what it was. It was a great time. And now, it’s doing wonderfully. And to me, that’s my legacy, I suppose. Is that I left it better than I found it. That’s for people like you to conjecture on. I don’t really care. I mean, I care because I invested a lot of time and effort into it, but whatever anybody says or writes about it, you can’t really worry too much about that. Because people will do what they’ll do. (Hirsch interview 2005a)
CHAPTER 6

THE ECOLOGY OF AN INSTITUTION:
THE OLD TOWN SCHOOL UNDER DAVID ROCHE, 2000-2005

The Old Town School as I encountered it initially in 2001 was the fully formed
corporation Jim Hirsch’s team had envisioned and built, running under the new leadership of
ethnomusicologist David Roche. The apparent sustainability of its organizational structure and
the social vibrancy of its community, now the size of a small town, were part of what attracted
me to the institution. By the time Roche was hired in late 2000, the Old Town School could no
longer be characterized by a handful of dominant personalities, nor could it be treated as a single
community (if indeed it ever could).

This and the following three chapters constitute the ethnographic portion of this
dissertation and examine institutional, educational and social aspects of the School in 2004 and
2005. While Chapter 7 will examine different approaches to teaching and learning and Chapters
8 and 9, some of the social subdivisions of the School, this chapter explores its administrative
structure. All three illustrate how the variegated texture of the School’s musical life, parcelled
out into “silos,” “bubbles” or “clans,” to use a few of the evocative metaphors chosen by people
there, do in fact connect and cohere, however imperfectly. “This school really is like the
elephant and the blind scholars. Everybody’s touching a different part of it. And they have a
very different view of what it is,” David Roche observed. He saw his particular challenge to be

1 David Roche served as executive director of the Old Town School from December 2000
through August 2006; as my fieldwork was for the most part concluded by the end of 2005,
however, 2006 is beyond the purview of this study. Few significant changes were made in the
organization in 2006, however.
2 Although I generally use the past tense to acknowledge that the information presented here was
particular to one specific period in OTSFM history, in three Chapters 6 through 9, it should be
understood that many of not most of the features of the Old Town School described here,
concrete and affective, remain in 2010-2011.
translating those seemingly fragmented pieces “into a unified field theory of what it is, that’s
different. And kind of pull back, so everything can fit under the big tent and still be the
OTSF"M” (Roche interview 2005a).

In this chapter, I describe the Old Town School of the first years of this century as an
institution defined by an organizational structure and a collective vision (unevenly shared) that
both proscribed and facilitated the creative work of the individual musicians within it. These
musicians, some of whom are also administrators, in turn animated the institution with their own
rich histories and passions, pursuing their goals within the supporting framework of the School,
rebuilding it in the process. This chapter also provides an overview of the institution as a whole
and serves as a record of musical activity occurring outside of classes and class-related
associations: concerts, festivals, community programming, youth outreach, resource services,
and musician referrals.

**Collective Vision**

*An ethnomusicologist at the helm.* In 2000, with Gail Tyler serving as Acting Executive
Director for eight months, the Board launched its first national search for an executive director,
justified by the Old Town School’s expanded size, level of organizational complexity, and new
potential and visibility; the institution had outgrown the model of hiring from within and needed
a proven professional administrator. There was, however, a strong and vocal contingent within
the School community advocating for Michael Miles to take over as the new director, and a
campaign was organized on Miles’s behalf. In the end, however, the position went to David
Roche, who holds a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology and was then Artistic Director for the San
Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival.
Although David Roche had spent the summer of 1966 in Chicago, as a college student ostensibly studying Hindi at the University of Chicago (but actually spending most of his time practicing sitar and exploring blues clubs with Charles Keil’s just-published book *Urban Blues* as his guide), he had not heard of the Old Town School until the early 1990s, when he served on the Folk Arts Panel for the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA), reviewing grant proposals. An institutional setting for teaching folk traditions seemed like an anathema and the Old Town School’s proposal left him with a vague and slightly puzzling impression: “This white institution that did kind of eclectic stuff, but what was the curatorial stamp? It wasn’t clear to me.” It wasn’t until the fall of 2000, when his brother, a bluegrass musician, forwarded him the announcement for this position that he ran across OTSFM again, just as he had begun looking for an executive directorship for the first time. Although it was late in the search, Roche was called in for a multi-day interview and visit in October. “Oh, I was overwhelmed! [….T]here was an incredible sense of largesse, and things just rolling on, and lots of activity.” He was impressed with the concert hall, the quality of the acts performing there, the Wiggleworms program—but it was the School’s finances that particularly caught his attention (Roche interview 2005a).

In reading the financials for the organization, I realized that this had a very strong base of tuition-paying people that were supporting this. Which was very, very different than other folk arts projects in this country, that are so dependent on contributed revenue to survive[….] So this was an incredible opportunity. I just immediately realized what a *golden* opportunity it was. (*ibid.*)

Equally intriguing to him were the educational programs, which did not seem to fit neatly into familiar pedagogical models.

I was curious about how things were being taught, and what were the methodologies. I have a Masters degree in Kodály method as well as ethnomusicology—so I realized there wasn’t that kind of a method[….] There was something else going on here, that to do with institutionalization of a folk process, it was like an urban socialization, urban front porch. Trying to figure out how that *worked*, in the short time I was here. (*ibid.*)
Roche took a distinctive approach to his visit, which served to demonstrate to the hiring committee how much his leadership would contrast with his predecessor’s, that he was “a listener” and “not a top-down hierarchy person” (Roche interview 2005a).

So I came in thinking, this is really too good to be true. There’s no way in hell I’m gonna get the job here. There must be inside candidates, there must be…So decided—and this is sort of a technique that I use, because I was a consultant for NEA for many years, they’d send me out to check on things they’d funded[….] So I came in thinking, ok, I’m gonna come in as if I’m an NEA consultant. And I’m gonna talk to everybody[…] And what were the challenges, and what were the opportunities, and what was the lay of the land. Without any sense of, “Oh, I gotta impress some people.” It wasn’t about that at all. I just thought, if it’s meant to be, it’ll happen. (ibid.)

Roche and the hiring committee agreed, independently and in short order, that he was a good fit for the position. Guitar teacher Mark Dvorak, who served as the faculty representative on the hiring committee, remembers:

One of the things when David got hired—this was profound, in my view[….] They put him on the interview, and he described the school and they asked him, “What’s your take on the Old Town School?” And he described it in the exact terms Win Stracke had ten years earlier [to me]. It just blew me away. The guy said, “What do you think, Mark?” And I said, “That’s the guy.” It just felt like—goodness gracious—it was haunting! He just said it exactly the same way. He said, “It’s a little Chicago.” Different ethnic groups. No, it was “What’s your vision?” was the actual question, if I’m correct. In terms of vision, it’s like, what’s in your heart about this? That’s how Win did things, too. So I just felt so privileged to be in Win’s little living room where he lived at the time. And then to be in this office building with all these people that had so much invested in the school, interviewing—or being part of the interview process for the new executive director, and then you hear that from two different ways. I was very pleased he was chosen for the job. Very pleased. (Dvorak interview 2005)

His background combined interests in the folk revival, non-Western music (with extensive knowledge of Asian traditions), and music education; an impressive educational pedigree, with two Masters degrees and a doctorate; and fifteen years of practical experience as an administrator in the non-profit arts world. “I’ve always worked in music, my entire life. For
my whole working life[....] Everything has been either in academia directly, or in public sector work that has involved festival production, or curatorial arts administration. With a big, wide vocabulary of sounds” (Roche interview 2005b).

David Roche describes himself as a “typical American nomad,” who grew up in a displaced Midwestern family in New York, spent several years living in India, and was raising a mixed-race Asian American family themselves just displaced to Chicago from California. Indeed, as of this writing, he has returned to San Francisco after ten years in Chicago. Roche grew up in Chappaqua, a far suburb in Westchester County, New York. A bedroom community for New York City in a rural setting, it was “fairly affluent,” though more economically mixed than it is now, with excellent schools. David’s father, who worked for New York Bell Telephone Company, had grown up in West Virginia coal country, where he earned a degree from West Virginia University; his mother grew up in North Dakota in a musical family (her mother taught piano and her father was the town fiddler and accordion player, as well as a gas station owner), and herself had played piano for a movie theater. During the Depression, both parents had moved to New York, where they met and married. David, born in 1946, was the youngest of their four children (Roche interview 2005b).

There was plenty of music in the Roche home. His mother, of course, had always played, and his father, who loved to dance, became a big fan of Lawrence Welk’s polka music. His eldest brother got into the beatnik and folk scenes of the 1950s and brought home cool jazz and Folkways records. “I remember when those would arrive. And those were very indelible in my head.” His second oldest brother eventually became a professional bluegrass musician, picking up the banjo at the age of thirteen, aided by Pete Seeger’s How to Play the 5-String Banjo. David and his sister had more formal musical training in the classical tradition. Aside from
singing Christmas carols around the piano once a year, however, “the coolest part of Christmas,” there was not a lot of group music making around the house (Roche interview 2005b).

When asked what his parents expected of him, Roche replied, “Unbridled success.”

Music was one of the areas where he was identified early as a gifted child; he began with piano, then brass instruments, studying French horn with the NBC Symphony’s first horn player. He was also very successful in sports, playing first baseball, then football and basketball, in which he played at the all-state level. In fact, the two realms of activity were connected for him.

I think it really had to do with performance—you know, the thrill and the fear of performance? Very compelling for me. And wanting to be out there and…and the high of performing well, the low of being terrified of performing. That huge swing, that huge emotional swing, being really quite addicting for me. But eventually giving up the performing stuff because it was just too much of the nervousness around it. (Roche interview 2005b)

Athletics gradually began to eclipse music—“it was like boys in ballet—it was sort of like a wimpy thing, you know? And there was so much identity with being in sports, and I was also kind of a social leader, president of my class and crap like that.” But the emergence of a folk music scene helped tip the scales back to music; in his junior year, Roche formed a jug band, influenced by his older brother who was playing semi-professionally in Boston by then (ibid.).

Roche attended Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, for his undergraduate studies, and was there when they were first establishing the doctoral program in world music. He had gone intending to major in English, with an interest in Old English, but was quickly discouraged by Anglo-Saxon—“Little did I know I’d be studying Sanskrit!” He discovered anthropology first, then as a sophomore stumbled into the graduate-level world music survey course, taught by David McAllester and Bob Brown, and began studying alongside the Ph.D. students. It was much more than just intellectual stimulation that drew Roche into this new field, however. “Every Friday night, there were these things called ‘curry concerts’ out on this farm
that Bob Brown was renting from the university, he lived out there[....] And then they had visiting artists [...] these incredible living national treasures of Indian music”—as well as Japanese music, Ghanaian music, and other non-Western musical traditions. “It was incredibly heady stuff.”

Because the curry concerts that would happen Friday, the students would go out, and we’d sit out in the kitchen with the artists, and we’d make this curry dinner, and anybody could come. We had these design students from Yale come up from New Haven, other people. And then there’d be this concert, with these musicians from India, in a very intimate setting, maybe fifty or sixty people there, listening to these national treasures doing Karnatak music. And then we’d have this dinner that we all cooked, this big curry dinner. And then Bob Brown would put on these belly dance field music tapes that he’d recorded, and everyone would dance. This was like an amazing, sensuous experience. And that was my introduction to ethnomusicology. So it’s unbelievable.

TL: Wow. So who wouldn’t stick with it?

DR: Exactly! [TL laughs] (Roche interview 2005b)

Roche immediately dove into the new world of Indian music. “I was studying religions and philosophy of India—Sanskrit, I was whole-hog going for it.” By the end of his sophomore year, he had studied mridangam and Karnatak vocal music with visiting artists at Wesleyan and had been accepted to a yearlong study abroad program in India. After his summer in Chicago, where he became so absorbed in the city’s musical worlds that he nearly failed his Hindi course, he spent his junior year in Benares, studying Hindustani vocal music, flute, and sitar (Roche interview 2005b).

This was just as Indian classical music was gaining popularity in Europe and North America, just as the Beatles were beginning to incorporate the sound of the sitar into their albums and Ravi Shankar was becoming an international star. “It was in the air,” Roche said. It was the summer of 1967 when he returned to the United States for a summer job in San Francisco, just days after Shankar had played at the Monterey Pop Festival. “That was the
summer of *Sgt. Pepper,* one of the earlier Beatles albums featuring sitar. “I was in a room with Bob Brown, Ali Akhbar Khan, Ashish Khan […] for their first hearing of *Sgt. Pepper.* And it was also my first hearing[. . .] But we all thought it was *genius* work[. . .] That was one of those moments, when you hear something and you *know* that it’s *big.* I’ll always remember that experience” (Roche interview 2005b).

By that time, he had decided to switch to a double major in anthropology and music in order to study ethnomusicology.

I came back, I wrote this letter to my parents. And it was the only letter ever received from my Dad. My entire life. He said, “You’re crazy, you’re out of your mind.” Basically. They were a little upset when I went to in India to begin with. They tried not to show it—they were pretty good about keeping their distance. They kind of trusted that I was—the kid was gonna come out all right. By this time. But it was a little hard for them to understand all what was going on. (Roche interview 2005b)

He did not expect to follow a purely academic path, however. “I really wanted to do something *creative.* It wasn’t necessarily to be an academic ethnomusicologist.” For his senior thesis, in lieu of a paper, he made a fifteen-minute film of *shakuhachi* master and visiting artist Yamaguchi Goro playing a piece called “Waterfall.” “There were these twenty-four second dissolves of Yamaguchi playing this piece […] to these images of water through the forest leaves of the fall in Connecticut. And some of it synched up to kind of the rhythm of the melody[. . .] It was totally wild, how we edited this thing together.” But the experience discouraged him from a career in film. “The whole year was spent fundraising. I got so burned out.” After college, he went back to India on a Fulbright and stayed there for two years, studying sitar intensively. “That was my Juilliard.” He then returned to Wesleyan to earn a masters degree in ethnomusicology, “with idea that I would become a world-class sitar player, and write even more
about the sitar.” Roche’s experiences at Wesleyan, and the immersive sojourns in India that they led to, profoundly affected his professional path and his conceptions of music.

It was always hard for me to stick in straight academia. Because I really did—I still believe that it’s the musicking part of music that is the key. There are music historians, there are very knowledgeable people and so on. But the playing of the music and what happens when you’re a sound producer, a sound organizer—that’s the religious experience. And for me, music is always a religious experience. Even when it’s quote-unquote “entertainment.” I’m always looking for—I mean, that’s what authenticity is to me, somebody that’s playing out of the spirit. If it’s a party band and they’re trying to entertain a crowd of dancers, the ones that are successful are the ones that are truest to their, to that spirit. Of producing sound that’s really strong enough to animate people to dance. (Roche interview 2005b)

Years later, he began a Ph.D. program in ethnomusicology at the University of California at Berkeley. “I had come around to the point of, no, I want to write as a musicologist. Because that’s what they call people who study Indian music in India. But I want to do something that even an Indian musicologist doesn’t study. And that’s when I ended up in folk and tribal music.” Despite his enthusiasm, Roche’s progress was slow; he spent more than a decade writing his dissertation and finally earned his Ph.D. in 1996. “I have to admit that I wanted to do something in ethnomusicology that nobody else was doing. It’s true, that was a drive, and that’s what was so slow for me, to get it all done. And it felt like mountain climbing at the end. Then, who cares? Ultimately.” As years of graduate study went by, and as he continued to stay involved with performing and hands-on arts programming, Roche became disillusioned with the realities of academic life and politics. “I began to realize how culturalist academia is. I began to lose my sense of meritocracy” (Roche interview 2005b).

“That was my life, in music at that point, kind of bridging between an academic discipline, which was ethnomusicology, and a musician or creative person working with music with a big, wide vocabulary, and a deep vocabulary. Who was not of that particular culture.
How does that work?” Roche began to make it work by supporting himself and his family with positions at various non-profit arts organizations in the Bay Area as he continued to write his dissertation. Most of these were short-term, presentation-oriented programs, such as performing arts festivals and concerts, where he played a curatorial role in addition to the meeting the events’ logistical needs. “Every project was a project. And didn’t necessarily mean that it lead to the next project. There were ups and downs. NEA was up, I was golden; NEA was down, I was out o’ luck. I see that to this day. This happens.” Each project required “heart and soul” to find the necessary funding and see it through, “programs that were curatorially excellent, but after the funding had its sunset, nobody wanted to fund it as a staff position, ongoing program. It was done. And feeling how disappointing that is, that you can only build something for two years, three years, and even if it’s the greatest thing on earth, it’s finished. And then you have to do something else.” It was frustrating and exhausting and Roche was looking for an alternate approach (Roche interviews 2005a and 2005b).

And so coming here and looking at the business model and the patronage in Chicago—these were very compelling to me. Because it was, I could see that there was a setting here of stability, that then I could then begin to incorporate other curatorial elements that might be somewhat lacking or have been secondary to this building, this entrepreneurial model that was here. So that was very attractive. I had no idea exactly how that was going to play out. But I felt very lucky. (Roche interview 2005b)

Roche began work as the Old Town School’s new executive director December 1, 2000, just days after he was hired. After a period of transition, the Old Town School community seemed to reach a consensus that they, too, were lucky to have Roche; although I of course heard various complaints about his leadership during my fieldwork, as one hears for any leader, it was clear that he was broadly accepted and respected by that time, and that the political climate among staff and faculty was successfully healing after the tensions and turmoil of recent years.
Guitar teacher Jimmy Tomasello, who had been a strong supporter of Michael Miles’s candidacy, voiced this confidence in my interview with him, acknowledging how important Roche’s change of approach had been: “Well, at the time, we were all disappointed. But I mean, David’s the greatest thing that’s happened to this school. Absolutely. His knowledge and his understanding and direction could bring the School into the real national presence that it wants, really, as opposed to, you know, ‘McFolk’ [laughs]” (Tomasello interview 2005a).

Strategic planning for the new century. Roche’s first task was to lead a strategic planning process—in fact, having the opportunity to do this had been one of the most appealing aspects to the position. The planning process had begun with some preliminary analysis under Jim Hirsch in early 2000, but with his resignation and the executive director search, it had been put on hold. A Strategic Action Planning Committee was assembled to include balanced representation from different OTSFM constituencies; it comprised three board members, three faculty members, three administrative staff members, the Executive Director, the Chair of the Board, and the Chair of the Committee.³

The process was intended to define the institution’s priorities, provide the staff and leadership with a basis for decision-making, and thus generally to manage future growth intelligently and coherently. In coming up with a set of clear action goals, the group articulated for the first time what they believed to be the shared values of the Old Town School and fashioned a new, cleaner mission statement. In order to do this, Roche had insisted that they start with concrete observations and leave the mission statement until the very end of the process,

³ The members were: Board member Rick Simon as Chair of the Committee; Howard Green, Chair of the Board; David Roche, Executive Director; Marjorie Benton, Eduardo Camacho and Mary Ittelson, Board members; Anne-Marie Akin, Mark Dvorak and Steve Levitt, faculty; and Community Programs Director Juan Dies, Development Director Colin Moore, and Education Programs Director Kerry Sheehan, staff (OTSFM 2001)
perhaps a consequence of his training as an ethnographer, which led him to base theory on observation, but also based on his recent, practical experience with strategic planning processes.

Because I’d seen this happen in these other strategic plans, where people spent so much time wordsmithing the mission plan that they had no energy left to actually talk about what they did, and what the programs were and so on. By the time we got to the mission statement, it was almost—it was sort of down to staff and faculty people, because everybody else was exhausted, from yinning and yanging about what the programs were and what they should do. But the document that has come off of that strategic plan, which was done in 2001-2002, we built it to last through the fiftieth anniversary, which is ’07, and it’s still—it’s an active document. It’s much more of an active strategic plan with yearly action steps than any other plan I’ve ever been involved with, over twenty-five years of arts administration. So that worked pretty well. And people really bought in. And it’s been very, it was a very valuable step to at least put a stake in the ground about, “OK, we’re talking about culture change.” (Roche interview 2005a)

The leadership had already agreed earlier in the year that the mission statement then current, which was inelegant and had remained essentially unchanged for many years, even decades, needed to be “more focused and inspiring” (OTSFM 2001):

The Old Town School of Folk Music serves as a local and national resource for teaching and performing and celebrating the folk music, art and culture from all countries. The Old Town School of Folk Music strives to collect, preserve and display folk music and related materials, and to reach out to new audiences of all ages, cultures and abilities by appealing to the universal human need for musical self expression. (OTSFM Catalog of Adult Programs, Fall/Winter 2001)

The term “folk” appears four times in this statement (including its use in the name of the institution), and yet is not defined. OTSFM had already made a commitment to defining folk by implication and example, a strategy which had demonstrated practical validity but no intellectual satisfaction, as it created a circular definition: folk music was what the Old Town School of Folk Music did, and whatever it did, was folk music. Sidestepping the actual semantics left people at the Old Town School employing a variety of personal definitions—some idiosyncratic, some outdated—often confusingly at odds with what was really being performed there under the “folk music” banner. “Well, what is folk music?” That became an issue. Because people have very
essentialist ideas of what folk music is. And I didn’t” (Roche interview 2005b). Here, Roche’s academic background lent a broader perspective to the conversation, both in the diversity of his experiences and knowledge, as well as his understanding of the intellectual history behind such terminology; he wanted the School community to work on “cleaning up the language.” He had also been through these discussions before.

Because it was the same thing in San Francisco with the word “ethnic.” That’s another loaded term. Ok, so the loaded term here was “folk.” So what’re we going to do about it? Well, we didn’t talk about it. We avoided it. We avoided talking about it until we talked about what our programs [were…] And we avoided talking about it by not doing the mission statement up front, but doing it at the end. ‘Cause that’s when you can talk about it. Everything else was about “what are we doing?” Well, we have this bluegrass stuff, we have this dance stuff. Ok, well, let’s talk about all those pieces. (Roche interview 2005b)

Since Roche felt, as many contemporary scholars do, that “folk music” was actually too vague and conflicted a term to be useful, he simply asked everyone to avoid using it as a descriptive term. “And that’s been an ongoing struggle here with people, to not use ‘folk,’ as in a sentence like, ‘Well, we do folk dance,’ or ‘We have this folk music program,’ because people do not know what you mean, or they think they know what you mean, and they have a narrow interpretation” (Roche interview 2005b). Eventually, Roche arrived at “popular culture” as a term he was comfortable using to describe the purview of the School. In my observations, however, even though it had apparently been useful during the strategic planning process, this term was not widely adopted by the OTSFM community, probably due to its relative lack of currency in colloquial American discourse on music.

We’re curators of popular culture. So that became a working semantic where I could defuse the stuff about “That’s not folk! What’s folk about that?” Because people just [whooshing noise] go around in circles and circles and circles[…] But people don’t know what that means, because that’s kind of an academic term as well. And “popular culture” has much more credence in United Kingdom English that it does in American English. People don’t think of, that under “popular culture” you have mass mediated culture, as well as Appalachian ballad
singers, as well as—you know, they don’t understand that it’s about the populace and what comes forward as a form that a group of people do, rather than as a named, elite kind of composition. (*ibid.*)

The new mission statement the committee eventually arrived at was indeed focused, eloquent, and reasonably inspiring, and entirely avoided any use of loaded terms like “folk,” “ethnic,” or “popular”:

The Old Town School of Folk Music teaches and celebrates music and cultural expressions rooted in the traditions of diverse American and global communities.4

“Folk” remained in the name of the School, of course, apparently not seriously contested; Gail Tyler’s argument for its value as a brand identity had won the day years earlier. And, in fact, it remained in the everyday discourse as well, as amply evidenced by interview quotations throughout this dissertation; I observed those among the higher levels of management, however, taking considerable care in applying the term in any but the loosest, most inclusive sense (i.e., “music that folks make”).

In addition to articulating five key values of the Old Town School (see Chapter 1), the strategic plan outlined six strategic areas for growth, with specific goals in each: “Education,” “Performance,” “Participant Diversity,” “Youth Outreach,” “National Leadership,” and “The Old Town School Experience.” Most of these did not represent a significant change of direction, but rather a focusing of priorities and an expansion and improvement of existing strengths. For example, the first goal under “education” was: “Meet the needs of students by expanding the current repertoire of classes to meet demand while maintaining the unique traditions of the Old Town School and the diversity of ethnic and cultural programming” (OTSFM 2001, 10).

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4 Of course, “global,” as well as “cultural” and “traditions” are loaded terms within academic discourse; they did not seem to be at this time in the context of the Old Town School or arts programming generally at the time, however. Perhaps these debates will surface there at some point in the future.
“National leadership” did, however, represent something new. Though the OTSFM leadership had had some interest in expanding its influence beyond Chicago under Hirsch, Roche’s actual experience with folk and traditional arts organizations nationally made it feasible to formulate appropriate goals. Rather than approach national visibility in business terms as a franchising opportunity, OTSFM now sought to serve “as a resource and model for others and as an umbrella organization for exchanges among arts and educational organizations.” The strategic plan proposed to do this by “documenting and disseminating the School’s unique educational methods, offering professional consultation to other organizations and serving as a catalyst for exchange among organizations” (OTSFM 2001, 12). OTSFM’s partnership with Smithsonian Folk Life in 2005-2006 to celebrate Latino Chicago was a successful product of this reorientation.

“Participant diversity” seemed to be one of areas where making satisfying progress was more challenging, though OTSFM had of course been trying to attract more minority participation for years already, with measurable success in certain areas, especially among Latino audiences. Efforts had recently become diffuse, however, and new strategies were needed.

We kind of honed down to one of these five, six steps for participant diversity. And we had this meeting with faculty and staff, predominantly, about, “Ok, so what action steps are we talking about? What groups?” [We had been] trying to cover a lot of ground. And we were clearly in mood to be more productive and focused[….] It was the lay of the land, the tenor of the discussion was that we had a very strong Latino program, that’s what we were deepening. And what we were gonna broaden out to next is African-American. Because that’s what American music is about: the mainstream of European, the mainstream of Africa, tributaries of Native America and other things. But, you know, we need to take care of business there. (Roche interview 2005b)

Significantly, this plan focused on students, audiences, and musical traditions represented, but neglected strategies for diversifying the faculty and staff of the School.
Finances. The Old Town School continued its remarkably good financial health during this period; by 2004, it was operating with an $8.3 million budget (OTSFM 2004 Annual Report). Growth had slowed, however. The capital campaign to finance the renovation of the Hild Library building and the School’s move had taken place at a time when philanthropic causes were benefiting from a ragingly positive stock market.

The timing of the move here, 1998, the timing of most of the capital campaign—there was money in the market. Jim Hirsch would go ask, and he would get. It was a worthy cause, we ran it really well (he won a number of arts management awards). And just people having money to give that made it possible to—the timing couldn’t have been better. (G. Tyler interview 2005)

The publicity surrounding the move, which the OTSFM was careful to capitalize on, further drove growth. “Part of the growth was we just had this new visibility, everybody was curious, a lot of people tried it, tried the school out” (ibid.)

The turn of the century brought financial worries, however. Excitement over the new facility was ebbing, the building had nearly reached capacity, and changes in the economy and the School’s leadership slowed the funding pipelines.

We had to retrench, when we had a change of leadership that brought about also about the same time as the market crash. And a lot of uncertainty. Funders were not comfortable funding the School, not knowing who the new leaders were. Some foundations did not approve of the change—you know, they saw it as a sign of instability. So we lost the Joyce Foundation after years of supporting this. We lost almost all of our funding for my programs. (Dies interview 2005)

This was of concern to the School overall, and in particular, as Juan Dies pointed out, a threat to the survival of his non-revenue-producing community development and diversity building programs nurtured over the past decade. Here, however, Hirsch’s business legacy maintained stability, and OTSFM did not respond as would grant-funded programs of the type Roche was leaving.
I respect the School for keeping me on staff after there was no money coming in for—no grant money—for supporting my position. I think we made a case that I was bringing enough business into the School. And I thank Jim Hirsch for having that vision of fighting to retain stability for these programs, because in another organization, if we had been running all these programs just with grant money, the minute all that runs out, you gotta cut positions. People have to go. But I think we built a system—and part of the [internal] census was also a thing to keep a record of increased audiences, and the revenues that were being brought in by this initiative. And that whether we were getting grants for it or not, it was good business to continue to do this. (Dies interview 2005)

In terms of overall budget, however, the School did not seriously suffer from these setbacks. They were able to stretch capacity a bit further than anticipated by re-opening the Armitage building for adult classes, purchasing a small building next to the Lincoln Square facility for extra classroom space in the winter of 2000-2001, and becoming more efficient at scheduling space. Even then, growth did not peak until 2002 because of a short-term boost from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. “After 9/11, nobody went anywhere, people cancelled business trips […] no one traveled. Everybody decided other things were more important for a very brief period of time. And we were already on a trajectory[…] People wanted to be someplace[…] The 9/11 effect extended our growth run[…] Life’s too short” (G. Tyler interview 2005). Enrollment stayed strong, though concerts suffered, at least partly because of the extreme difficulty in obtaining visas for foreign musicians at that time. The post-9/11 economic downturn did slow enrollment, “because we filled up everything. And people lost their jobs, when the economy started to go, in 2000-2003, and people started to get laid off, adult registration went into toilet. Kid registration went into the toilet a little bit. Because those are sixteen-week classes, and you ask people for $200, you know?” (ibid.) Total revenue showed no actual decline until 2004, which ended with a deficit of $385,000, the largest the School had seen
Figure 6.1: OTSFM total revenue, compared with total expenses, 2001-2004
Sources: Old Town School of Folk Music 2003 and 2004 Annual Reports, graphed by the author.

Figure 6.2: OTSFM Revenue sources compared with expenditures by category, 2001-2004
Sources: Old Town School of Folk Music 2003 and 2004 Annual Reports, graphed by the author.
Table 6.1: Old Town School of Folk Music Financial Summary, 2001-2004

Sources: Old Town School of Folk Music 2003 and 2004 Annual Reports

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<td><strong>7,611,628</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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<td><strong>8,233,032</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,683,586</strong></td>
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| Net surplus/(deficit) | (384,748) | 207,006 | (71,958) | (62,677) |

in recent history; even then, it was decline in revenue of only about 7%, and 2003 had shown a year-end surplus of $207,000 (see Figure 6.1 and Table 6.1). Gail Tyler assessed the trend in 2005 to be “at least flat.”

The financial stability that had so impressed David Roche on arrival was based on a heavy reliance on tuition income; instructional programs consistently ran a profit, which was then used towards other areas like outreach and general administration costs (see Figure 6.2). Fundraising (including grants), which in Roche’s experience had been the bread-and-butter of
non-profit organizations, was bringing in a net revenue of only 7% of the budget. Retail and concerts only barely broke even, if that, but both drew new potential students to the building.

*Change and continuity among the “administrative silos.”* The Old Town School’s administrative staff, a category in which I include everyone from the senior staff making the major decisions affecting everyone on down to the support staff answering phones and selling tickets, occupied a uniquely central position in the daily life of the institution by the simple fact that they were there every day. The vast majority of teachers came in only a few days a week for a few hours at a time, often in the evenings, and students generally came only once a week, but most of the staff was a constant weekday presence. Of the eighty staff members employed at OTSFM in 2004-2005, nearly half were either full-time administrators or, by virtue of teaching a few classes on top of their administrative duties, effectively full-time. The bulk of the part-time employees worked at the front desk in customer service, in concert support (working mostly evenings), in the music store as sales staff, or as custodial staff. Aside from a relative degree of transience among the part-time staff (who were also generally younger), it was remarkable how stable the administrative staff was overall; a significant proportion, perhaps a majority, had predated Roche’s hire.

There are people with a much longer institutional history now than I have. And are still here. Because people want to work here, all things considered. And that’s—it’s a double-edged sword. Because people who had figured out ways to survive in a culture with a whole different leadership style than I display, and expectations. That’s asking them to make a big culture change. And some do more successfully than others, or faster than others. But there is a whole organic change here. (Roche interview 2005a)

Work styles, communication styles, interpersonal politics—the overall “culture” of the staff—were therefore well established, and David Roche was conscious of the need to be sensitive and observant in attempting any culture change.
So within an institution of this size, making any kind of dramatic change, without big drama—I mean, they had drama in here, in terms of personnel changes and so on. And that was kind of polarizing. My sense was that it polarized the Board from the staff, and then certain staff members from each other, and then staff and faculty—I mean there are all these polarities that were floating. So for me, I had to learn a matrix for—or maybe a metrics—for measuring how I would regard success within this institution. In terms of individuals, how they were working. What kind of passion that they were…what kind of articulation, how do they could articulate what they were doing, and why that was important. And then the last thing would be what kind of skill sets they were carrying around. And then how to make it all work, without firing everybody! [laughs] […] I wasn’t gonna do that. So for me, it was about learning this culture as an anthropologist, really. (Roche interview 2005a)

In 2000-2001, the climate was not particularly peaceful; “things were in turmoil, let’s put it that way” (Roche interview 2005a). Gail Tyler had done her best as Interim Director to keep the School on track, while continuing to tend to her marketing responsibilities and also taking on facilities and operations as a small wave of resignations left positions open; for her it was “eight months of doing, kind of messing up H.R. [laughs] and trying to keep morale up, and ‘keep everything moving’ was kind of the objective of that” (G. Tyler interview 2005). Roche spent his first few months feeling his way through the conflicts and controversies, learning to recognize different constituencies by age, attitude, personality, etc.

There were also some staff, some worker levels, where there were folks at middle and lower managerial levels that had some issues that had been festering for months, because there’d been an interim period. I didn’t know if there was a strong union movement among them or not. There was no manual here for me to—ah, let’s see, let’s look up “unions”—oh, customer service unions, nope, no such thing! I mean, there was nothing like that! And people were representing different voices as if, with authority. So I had to kind of gauge all that. It was a pretty steep, uphill learning curve. (Roche interview 2005a)

Roche perceived his greatest ongoing organizational challenge during his tenure at OTSFM as breaking down what he called the “silo operation” that seemed to be the prevailing modus operandi.
People would operate in silos, do their program as if other programs didn’t need to know about it so much, or needed to get any communication about it—especially if it was something that they were, it was a pet project that they wanted to have Old Town School’s imprimatur on it […] but they didn’t feel like either they wanted to or needed to contact other people in a timely to create that kind of net of responsibility. So that remains a challenge—I mean, that’s changed a lot—but that remains a challenge. To get people to realize that the kneebone connects to the thigh bone—you know, that if you do something different over here, that it’s gonna connect, it’s gonna throw them off over here. You know, it’s like tugging the end of the tablecloth and moving the fork at the far end. It happens that way. And getting people conscious of that. (Roche interview 2005a)

Youth Outreach Manager Yolanda Androzzo had a similar impression, trying to integrate herself into the existing administrative structure when she was hired a few years later.

It is a community, but everyone’s really focused on what their thing is. For the most part. I feel like, administratively there—kind of the longer you’re here, it seems like, the more comfortable people may be with working with you. So you start to collaborate a bit more[….] But it took time to make that kind of—to get that kind of relationship going between departments. So I mean, I know that we’re all aware in administration that we’re so—we are still separate. People kind of work on their own thing. And, like I said, sometimes it’s time constraint, people may also be somewhat protective over their—“this is my baby.” You know? (Y. Androzzo interview 2005)

The School was not without a tradition of conversation across the entire institution, however. “The school has always been good, this is going back to Hirsch’s day, of having meetings in which all staff are invited. They’ve never been very successful at getting people to come, but they’ve always been held[….] Very good approach” (Landt interview 2005). Coming partly from university environments, the lack of compulsion to attend was a surprise to Roche. “I remember calling the first faculty meeting, thinking that this was like a faculty meeting at some university, where if you call for a faculty meeting, people show up! [laughs] Oh, I was wrong! So I began to get the culture of this place. There was a certain kind of anarchy that is the modus operandus” (Roche interview 2005a).
Roche experimented with a variety of strategies to improve communication and cross-fertilization between different parts of the organization. In 2005, for example, he was trying out smaller meetings amongst staff who didn’t normally work together in lieu of large, all-staff meetings.

So for the last six months, I’ve had a moratorium on group meetings, just to see what would happen! Was that going to help communication between senior staff people? Because I’ve found that at big meetings, people get very passive. They don’t hear it, there kind of is a wash, they’re in attendance, their bodies are there, but their minds can be drifting anywhere[…. I tried] to create smaller meetings across traditional borders of managerial supervision with people that I needed to get in the room together, because we had to take care of some business. Whether they knew it or not, we needed to get, to move it to another place, because the movement was just too glacial[….] I see some change in some people that I thought were so locked in the past culture, or their own kind of culture models. Now that they’ve had to work with people in different ways in a more intense way over a longer period of time, so they’ve created a new relationship. (Roche interview 2005a)

To my surprise, Roche actually drew me into one of these—a full-blown project, actually. He apparently wanted a documentary film to be made about the Old Town School (he alluded to this in personal conversation at another time), but rather than announce that it should be done and assign staff to the project, or directly contract it out, he brought a group of us together, presumably hoping for organic synergy. I was invited to join Rebecca Toon, a young guitar teacher, and Ryan Kirlin, who worked at the front desk, both of whom had some background in video production (Rebecca was currently helping videotape concerts for the Resource Center), in a half-day workshop on documentary video production tailored for us at Kartemquin Films, a nearby non-profit production company best known for their award-winning films Hoop Dreams and Stevie. A couple of weeks later, we were assigned to assist two Kartemquin videographers in filming a weekend-long fandango event organized by Juan Dies and Colleen Miller; excerpts were later broadcast on local television.
Finally, Roche convened a meeting in the Resource Center with Jim Morrisette and Zak Piper from Kartemquin, Juan Dies, Colby Maddox, Rebecca, and me, to discuss video capability at the Old Town School—what equipment and skill was available in-house, what would be needed to duplicate and transfer video effectively, how Colby might incorporate these needs into grants he was writing, etc.—all with the goal of improving both archival preservation of and public access to performances at OTSFM. I conjectured in my fieldnotes:

David and Juan clearly have unspoken dreams (which remained unspoken!) of larger video projects. David's being kind of cagey. He tells me and it seems he’s talked to others as well about getting Kartemquin to do a full-scale documentary about the place, yet it's clear he's made no mention of it to them yet. I think he's trying to lure them in somehow. But of course also genuinely trying to assess and train in-house talent. (Fieldnotes for June 7, 2005)

To the extent that I heard expressions of annoyance over Roche’s leadership style, it was, in fact, that he was too vague, too suggestive without giving decisive direction. From my conversations with him, I believe this was conscious and deliberate on his part, that he was far more interested in effecting organic change in how people worked together than in directly controlling them. This seemed to provide a helpful counterbalance not only to the more authoritative style of his predecessor, but also to the increasing need to standardize policies and regulations in an institution of the size OTSFM had attained. But it could leave people without clear direction.

*Retaining a human scale.* Michael Miles expressed some of the sense of loss older community members felt as the School became a less intimate place, when I asked him if there had been resistance to its growth.

When it was in the 909 [Armitage] building, that growth was pretty exciting. I think the resistance [to growth] came with the new space. New location, different demeanor to the place, much larger administration upstairs, nobody sees 'em. I think there are people who will always like it the way it used to be. And there are certain inevitabilities with growth. There’s the impersonal sides of it. I still,
when I go into the School, I don’t know the people at the front desk. (Miles interview 2005a)

Jason McInnes, a more recent hire as Human Resources Assistant, clearly described the trade-offs in working for the Old Town School, as a large organization.

The School’s pretty interesting in that it’s a place that is really open and free and do-your-own-thing, but then it’s also a corporation that has a lot of responsibility for a lot of people. We have a really big staff. You know, I think sometimes if teachers—like take guitar for example. Every little guitar shop on the street has a couple rooms in the back where they teach some lessons. You know, whatever. Having worked in a shop like that, it can be pretty loosey-goosey in terms of what’s charged, who gets paid, when do people show up, stuff like that.

At the School, we’re large enough that for better or worse that we can’t have any—it’s like yeah, you show up now, this isn’t when your class is. You can sub these classes, you can’t sub these classes, this is how much you’re paid[….] Teachers have to come in and be able to work within a system that’s pretty entrenched[….] My joke is that this is the one place you can work for a company this size to teach people how to play “Yellow Submarine.” You know, you’re not gonna be able to get that anywhere else. (McInnes interview 2005)

There was a general sense that in spite of the corporate organizational strategies that necessarily accrued as it grew, the OTSFM ought to conscientiously retain a human scale.

Speaking about the School overall, not just staff, long-time guitar teacher Steve Levitt observed:

The School is less focused because it’s more general. It’s bigger. It’s…there’s no longer any pretense here of it being a storefront, homespun sort of thing. Although that persona, the sensation that the School ought to be a little less corporate, a little less bureaucratic than the spaces around them, lingers and informs what everybody does, and probably should. ‘Cause people come to the Old Town School I think expecting a more personal, slightly slower time frame here. And a chance to sort of breathe the air of something that’s important. (Levitt interview 2005b)

Hirsch’s own hierarchical style notwithstanding, there remained a sense at the School throughout its history that authority ought to be worn lightly. Jimmy Tomasello, who had been student, store employee and teacher, tried to take a very egalitarian approach to his new administrative role as Guitar Program Manager in the late 1990s.
My big thing—see I didn’t want to come in as a Mr. Nazi, as a guitar thing. ‘Cause I was coming from the ranks anyway, and I wasn’t gonna be, “Ok, now they made me do this, now you guys have to do that.” And I just didn’t want to do that to my peers because, you know, I consider them peers. I don’t consider, like, I’m your “boss” you know. People call me “boss,” I go, “get outta here.” (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Firings and lay-offs were extremely rare.

That’s what I’ve learned from previous things, doing projects, being project-based curatorial, is that if you don’t have the funding, you’re gone, you’re history[....] And we try not to do that. If we bring on somebody. There’s been no position that’s been removed since I’ve been here. That’s kind of the history here. So that’s the sort of a human-oriented...positioning. That is special about the School. (Roche interview 2005a)

Jimmy Tomasello echoed that priority on humane dealings: “I’ve never had to fire anybody, no. Usually it’s just some sort of mutual thing that just doesn’t work. It’s just like, ‘Well, I haven’t got any classes for you this session, and I’ll let you know what’s going on.’ Kind of thing” (Tomasello interview 2005b).

It was also generally assumed that most staff—and certainly teachers—had artistic lives outside of the Old Town School that were careers or vocations, not mere hobbies, and accordingly, flexibility was built into the work life of the School. The workday schedule was not rigid, even for nine-to-five administrative employees; more than one person mentioned to me how much they appreciated being able to take a class in the middle of the day. While Roche did insist on a certain level of professional consistency, he generally favored retaining the flexibility.

I believe in flex-time. You have to have it. Especially because this organization is about teaching, education programs, and about presenting. So people have to run different kinds of hours. The problem lies with if people are not at the same level of energy that they’re putting in. So somebody’s two hours at work is really focused and productive, and somebody else’s two hours is spacey. That’s where that falls apart, but really believing that people will want to do the best they can and will fulfill all the hours, but there’s no way that that can be policed. (Roche interview 2005a).
Jobs at the front desk, café or music store were particularly attractive to young musicians who needed to supplement income earned from performing because it was commonly accepted at OTSFM that a staff member might leave for two or three months to tour with a band, then return. Quite a few rising Chicago indie rock and singer-songwriter acts were represented in these part-time positions, including Baby Teeth, Congress of Starlings (Aerin Tedesco and Andrea Bunch), The New Black, Orso, and The Thin Man. The privilege wasn’t limited to performing musicians. For example, my housemate, Gina Kelly, an artist who specializes in hand-printed silk-screen band posters, toured with the indie band Califone for more than a month selling merchandise for them, then returned to her job at the front desk without complication, something my other housemate Jenna Murfin had done with The Fruitbats a couple of years earlier. Those with greater financial responsibilities and anxieties did not always feel as secure in such a flexible environment, however.

But if I was to leave for five minutes, I don’t really know that I’d have the work to come back to. I really don’t get this secure warm fuzzy feeling that I could come back and take over my former duties. Although I’m probably wrong about that. It probably is...I don’t know. It just feels like I got what I got because I’m here to do it. (Maddox interview 2005a)

Although the Old Town School has been criticized as too “corporate” by some of the other folk music-oriented communities around Chicago, Skip Landt argued its tolerance for creative, idiosyncratic personalities belied that impression, and that it was, in fact, a very human place.

It’s never been corporate, it’s more now than it was, but still basically just by the very kind of people that we hire and that work here. If there was anybody with any sense of “let’s make this into a better organized place,” they wouldn’t be hiring some of the crazy people we have. Miki Greenberg, who runs the café, Miki is almost comittedly insane. Wonderful cook and musician, zany, talks your ear off, but that’s not that kind of person you hire if what you want is “Well, we have to have this café always open on time.” Miki does these things, but he’s not that kind of person. The School has always been very good at having kind of
a light hand at management, which is the secret of what a lot of the management is. (Landt interview 2005)

**Education Programs**

Education is of course the Old Town School of Folk Music’s primary mission, with the emphasis on music, but not exclusively. The 2004-2005 offerings also encompassed movement—dance and theatre, with a dash of yoga and pilates—and there was a small program in visual arts for children. More beginning than advanced classes were available, mostly reflecting demand, which itself is rooted in OTSFM’s priority on easy access to music education. Space and time allocations reflect this, of course; performances only occurred three or four nights a week, and only in the concert hall at Lincoln Square. Virtually all other times and spaces were dedicated to teaching, or services that support education, such as the Resource Center, music stores, café, and offices.

In 2004, the School saw approximately 35,000 student registrations, which averaged out to about 6,000 students attending class or lessons each week. The major part of educational programs consisted of group classes, for both adults and children. In terms of both enrollment and number of class titles, the adult catalog was the larger of the two. Adults and teens typically accounted for just under 50% of the total enrollment, while children accounted for about 40%; the remaining 12 to 13% were students of all ages taking private lessons. Education Programs were overseen by Kerry Sheehan, and subdivided into Guitar Programs, Dance Programs, Theater Programs, Private Lessons, Children’s Programs, and Adult Programs (which encompassed all the vocal and instrumental classes other than guitar).

*Adult group classes.* Adult classes met for eight-week (or in some cases sixteen-week) sessions, meeting once a week. There were six sessions each year, with a two-week break in
August. In 2005, OTSFM offered an average of 238 different class titles for adults each session (counting different levels of the same instrument as separate titles), with an average of 388 sections overall. Of those, approximately twenty-five sections were classes targeted at teens only. Adult classes were mainly offered in the evenings, Monday through Thursday, with a few on Friday mornings and weekend mornings and afternoons. (Weekend evenings were reserved for concerts.) Three times a year, the Old Town School published a course catalog, listing two sessions worth of classes. In 2005, this catalog took the format of a 30-page, 11.5 x 17-inch newspaper, and at that time, online listings were minimal, with no way to register over the Internet.

Tuition for an eight-week adult class in 2004 was $140 and in 2005, $145. As with most activities at the Old Town School, barriers to class participation were kept low. If a student was unable to afford tuition, s/he could apply for a scholarship; in 2005 a one-page application and an income tax statement was sufficient to prove need on a lenient sliding scale (slightly more paperwork than had been required the year before). On a graduate student income, I qualified for such a scholarship and paid only $17 for one of my classes each session. Anyone who knew of the opportunities at the School, including scholarships, and could physically get there, could enroll; the scholarship program was not prominently advertised, however. The volunteer system also provided a way for students to earn points toward class tuition through hours worked. Anyone could register for a beginning class, and prerequisites for more advanced classes were self-reported. Almost none of the classes required any sort of audition.

The largest department is, was, and has always been guitar, of course. The guitar curriculum was, accordingly, also the most standardized, and is described in the next chapter.
Financially, it actually supported less popular instructional programs—sometimes to the guitar teachers’ chagrin.

TL: Is [the Guitar Program] more than self-supporting?

JT: Shit, yeah. That’s why the teachers are so pissed off! [laughs] Come on! And so the attitude of the teachers is like, “Yeah, we’re paying everybody’s salary,” you know, between that and the Wiggleworms program. Do the math! You don’t have to, like, have a calculator! It’s just like, you’re sitting in a classroom with, like fourteen people, getting paid the same amount as someone who’s sitting in the classroom with four people, essentially. And, yeah. There’s a lot of gravy going on there. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Other instrument courses were roughly modeled on the guitar curriculum, with variations. Mandolin, for example, was offered at three levels, with alternating “skills” and “repertoire” courses, while the fiddle curriculum covered the fundamentals in levels one and two, expanded repertoire in level three, and offered a variety of more advanced styles at level four (e.g., bluegrass, Irish, Mexican or old time). The lower the enrollment for a given instrument, the fewer levels were offered. The vocal curriculum followed a similar logic, beginning with “Vocal Techniques” levels one and two, proceeding to “Harmony Singing 1 & 2.” Any of these students were welcome to join Second Half in the Concert Hall each evening after class; in practice, only guitar students did, for the most part, as discussed in Chapter 7. A wide variety of ensemble classes were offered, most providing opportunities to apply the skills learned in the basic instrumental and vocal classes; these are covered in depth in Chapters 8 and 9.

The second largest adult department after guitar was dance. As in other departments, the dance curriculum favored the beginner and the sampler, though two to three levels were offered in several traditions. To a greater extent than in the music curriculum, considerable ethnic diversity was represented in the dance traditions taught. At least in part, this was due to the relative lack of equipment requirements in dance; many different kinds of dance can be learned
in the same studio space. Although live musical accompaniment was provided for a few classes, including West African Dance, Flamenco, and Old-Time Clogging, most danced to recorded music. In the spring and summer of 2005, 22 different traditions were taught (13 of which were offered at more than one level) in 57 sections. Judging from the number of sections offered, Flamenco Dance, Hip-Hop/Funk/House, Latin Dance (covering salsa, cha-cha, merengue, etc.), Middle Eastern Belly Dance, Tap, and West African Dance were the most popular.

A small but steady enrollment sustained the Songwriting, Production and Theory curriculum; for most students, these were courses in which to develop more professionally oriented musical skills after playing for some time (at OTSFM or elsewhere). The course catalog recommended taking theory classes only after a student is comfortable on an instrument; in other words, written knowledge of music was considered secondary to aural/oral understanding. Although a standard, piano-based basic theory series covering harmony, scales, melodic structures, etc., was offered, “Guitar Fingerboard Theory” was more popular (see Chapter 7). Current students and veterans of the songwriting curriculum formed one of the many tight social orbits at the School, gravitating around the monthly open mic at First Fridays and the occasional gig or gathering at The Grafton pub next door. Many of these students would eventually pursue active careers in the singer-songwriter circles of the Chicago region. In addition, a handful of practical courses for gigging and/or/recording musicians were offered, including “Vocal Musicianship”—an introduction to dealing with a sound system, recording a demo, and developing stage presence, etc.—and “Recording Arts,” covering both equipment and software.

A small theatre faculty taught “Acting 101,” “Musical Theatre Ensemble,” and a series of improv classes. For the most point, no experience or auditions were required, and most classes ended with a performance. As with the music classes, the goal was less to train aspiring actors
than to give ordinary adults skills and confidence valuable in life in general—as well as to have a
good time. A few courses in non-musical movement—Yoga, Pilates, and Qi-Gong—rounded out the adult curriculum at the School. Most of these were offered during the daytime, and thus made use of available classroom space when it was not being used for music and dance.

Although teenagers were considered adults at the Old Town School and adult classes were open to anyone over the age of thirteen demonstrating a reasonable level of maturity, there were about a dozen teens-only classes, for ages twelve through eighteen. Since not every child is able to or interested in joining an adult class that young, these teen classes were an attempt to bridge the gap between kids’ guitar classes and adult classes; otherwise, teens tended to be pushed into private lessons only and lose the opportunity to play with others (Tomasello interview 2005b). Such classes ran the gamut from Teen Guitar to Teen Rock Ensemble, Conga, Basic Acting, Hip-Hop Theater, Flute Ensemble, to Teen Yoga.

*Children’s group classes.* Nearly as many children aged six months through pre-teen take classes each session at the Old Town School as adults. Indeed, many Chicagoans associate the Old Town School primarily with children because of the visibility of the Wiggleworms program, and it is not uncommon for a parent to be drawn into the adult curriculum after first coming to the School to bring their child to classes. The children’s catalog included approximately fifty different titles each session in 2005, with too many sections to list in the catalog. The most popular of the kids class, the Wiggleworms curriculum for babies and toddlers, was typically offered at over 170 different times and age levels, and Scribble, a preschool art curriculum, was offered at twenty-five. The length of each session and tuition costs were variable by class, ranging from $105 for an eight-week toddler dance class to $500 for a sixteen-week Suzuki cello class meeting twice a week.
In 2005, Wiggleworms celebrated its twentieth anniversary; over 2,000 students participated in the program that year on a weekly basis at five different locations in and around Chicago, according to the OTSFM annual report (OTSFM 2005 Annual Report). In celebration of the anniversary, special concerts were produced, a commemorative CD released, and a gallery exhibit devoted to the history of the program was mounted, further enhancing the programs visibility and reputation around the city.

In a January 2005 web-based survey, Gail Tyler found that 36% of parents who responded identified quality of teaching as the most attractive aspect of OTSFM for their children (in answer to the question, “What do you like most about the Old Town School?). In their comments, parents praised the teachers’ dedication, knowledge of child development and “genuine interest in the children.” Atmosphere was the second most important, chosen by 32% of parents, followed by the diversity of class offerings and convenience. Parent comments described a “chilled-out,” “family-friendly” and “relaxed and safe” environment that “feels like home” (OTSFM 2005b). Judy Davis, whose son studied piano and violin there throughout his childhood and teen years, stressed the importance of the non-competitive, informal attitude to her son.

I found out that my son is not the kind of serious, serious, serious student that goes to a formal recital and sits in the little suit and plays perfectly while people applaud nicely. That’s not my son. And I tried to figure out where could I send him for piano that they weren’t gonna be so uptight. And boy, was I right. I asked some people around and they said, “Oh, Old Town!” I said, “What’s Old Town?” “Oh, send him to Old Town, that’s the place for him!” And at his first little recital, just a few months into playing, everybody showed up in jeans for the recital, it was so laidback, that if a kid said, “Wait! Ah! I did that wrong, I’m gonna start over!” They could start over. Nobody cared, everybody still a lot of polite applause, it was such a relaxed—and this is the environment that was perfect for my son. Because after that first summer in a traditional Suzuki environment, he told me, “I’m gonna quit if I have to do this any more.” (Davis interview 2005)
Private lessons. The Old Town School offered private lessons on most instruments and voice to both adults and children in addition to group classes. For the most part, these were taught by the same faculty who taught the group classes (though there were a few teachers who only taught one or the other) and many of the students in private lessons had taken or would take group classes as well. Private lessons provided an opportunity for students to pursue a goal not appropriate to class—working out a particular technical issue, for example, or focusing closely on their own technique. It was also an option for those not comfortable with a group setting, of course. Some students might be impatient with the group setting, wanting to proceed at their own pace, not others’. Registration was for the same eight-week sessions as group classes, and tuition was $180 for 30-minute weekly lessons, $265 for 45-minute lessons and $350 for 60-minute lessons.

Workshops and other education events. In the spirit of encouraging people to participate in music making at all levels of commitment, the School offered one-day opportunities to experiment with something new in a friendly atmosphere, ultimately oriented towards facilitating real-world social music-making. Each weekend in 2005, one or two workshops were typically scheduled, each usually a couple hours long, with a cost of roughly $20 to $35, pre-registration required. Most common were workshops for guitarists beyond the beginning levels on various special techniques, such as finger-picking, flat-picking, bottle-neck blues guitar, African guitar styles, and guitar-based music theory. Some were taught by visiting performers, perhaps booked for an evening concert that same weekend, offered in the spirit of a master class. Dance workshops were also popular. Louis Stallone, for example, was regularly teaching dance basics for couples and Cajun and zydeco dance workshops.
Two of the most popular workshops were Colby Maddox’s “Fear of Commitment Mandolin workshop” and Skip Landt’s harmonica workshop, popular enough that they were offered nearly every session. In both cases, a student could leave the workshop with enough rudimentary skills and knowledge (summarized in an instructional packet to take home) to proceed with self-study, and to decide whether or not to enroll in a class. The harmonica workshop was suitable for complete beginners, while the mandolin workshop was primarily intended for guitar or fiddle players who wanted to try out the mandolin. Purchase of a diatonic harmonica (less than $10) was required for the former, but the Different Strummer would rent out mandolins for just the two-hour session, obviating the need for any level of commitment whatsoever.

One of the more popular multi-instrumental workshops was the Bluegrass Jam. Any of several bluegrass-oriented OTSFM teachers might lead it, usually more than one, and it amounted to a guided jam session, rather like a bluegrass-themed Second Half, complete with handouts and songsheets.

The format was simple. Pass out the song. Say a few words about it—not usually a formal introduction, usually a reaction from other teachers: “Oh this is a great one,” that kind of thing. Sometimes an anecdote about it, or trying to remember who did the original version. Sometimes more general info was shared, like about the prevalence of brother duos in the ‘20s and ‘30s. Sometimes specific technical info was imparted, usually banjo related from Dave. But mainly it was just playing. We’d play through the song beginning to end, sometimes with a little repetition of first verse or chorus, and with time made for several solos, more or less everyone in the room willing to give it a try. (Fieldnotes for October 23, 2005)

Another popular workshop was a DJ turntablimg workshop by Danny the Wild Child; although Danny maintained a busy performing schedule around the U.S. and internationally, often performing with DJ Q-bert, he had committed to teaching it once a session. “He doesn’t need this. But he’s a practicing artist[...] And he’s got some good ideas about music and he’s becoming a better and better teacher, so I’m really psyched that together we’ve been able to
create something that wouldn’t have existed without both of us in the mix” (Frede interview 2005b). One of the few hip-hop-oriented opportunities at OTSFM (other than the popular dance class), this drew a different range of students, largely white men in their late twenties and thirties, most with no previous hands-on experience (ibid.) Due to the nature of the practice, the workshop was structured as a lecture demonstration, followed by a series of one-on-one lessons.

Others were offered only occasionally or just once; Tim Eriksen from Dartmouth College taught a sacred harp singing workshop on November 13, 2005, well attended not only by curious students unfamiliar with the tradition, but also active members of the local Chicago sacred harp community. Eriksen interspersed singing instruction with lecture on the history of shape-note singing and its predecessors and provided a lot of verbal explanation of the appropriate aesthetic and performance practice, and most of all, social practice.

How an all-day sing is structured. How the best, most vigorous singing tends to happen after the big meal of barbecue and mac and cheese. How it’s always done seated except for the last song. And so on[...] As with the bluegrass jam, the point was to equip you with some basic musical skills and cultural information so that you could go out and join the real thing with some knowledge and confidence. Most of all to encourage you to do it. Tim did so over and over and made sure to allow time at the end for locals to tell us where to go to sing. (November 13, 2005)

Meanwhile, the singing became more and more robust and it became an active sing by the end of the afternoon. Eriksen has since returned at least a couple of times to repeat the workshop.

More casual than workshops were the “Six-String Socials” held nearly every Friday at the Armitage Street location of the Old Town School. These were led by one or more of the guitar faculty and were open to guitar players at any level (though occasionally someone might show up only to sing, or to try a compatible instrument like mandolin). Attendance was strictly drop-in, with five dollars taken at the door. Each one dealt with a different songwriter or theme, such as Lucinda Williams, the Carter Family, “Songs of the Class of 1995,” “Love Songs for
Valentine’s Day,” etc. The goal was to play through as many songs as possible and have a good time doing it, while learning a little something about the featured topic.

I attended a Six-String Social on the Carter Family on March 4, 2005, led by Rebecca Toon, Arlo Leach and Shana Harvey. Rebecca had compiled a detailed packet of nineteen songs, transcribed directly from recordings by Rebecca herself, with lyrics, chords, and tabs for the basic guitar lick, as well as little photos of something vaguely relevant, complete with several pages of biographical and historical material.

There were about ten people there total, seated in folding chairs in a circle on the stage in the auditorium at 909 [Armitage][…] The atmosphere was pretty quiet. People weren’t exactly timid, but nor were they really singing out or playing with confidence. Everyone, including the leaders, seemed to be waiting for someone else to take the lead[…] But there was an open conversational mood, among most of the people. And people really liked the songs. Rebecca shared some background on each one and we gossiped about Carter Family history. For each song, Rebecca would introduce it a little, and then the three would sing through some of it, a verse and a chorus at most, and then we’d start it over together, or sometimes just join in and carry on. People either did or didn’t do the little guitar licks and we pretty much did every song once, then on to the next[…] We stayed over till 8:15 [the event started at 6:00pm] and the building manager had to come in and kick us out. As we all packed up people chatted. (Fieldnotes for March 5, 2005)

The event was, again, quite similar in tone and practice to Second Half or the Grafton Folk Club, though smaller and less predictable, with the repertoire, leadership and participants changing each week.

First Fridays combined the educational, entertainment and social aspects of the Old Town School into one casual, monthly event. On the first Friday of every month the School hosted a “night of music and community,” a sort of musical buffet with several different kinds of musical events going on in different rooms, open to the public. A low entry price of four dollars granted admission to the entire evening. The evening would open early, at 6:30 pm, with various participatory events in different classrooms, such as a song circle led by Steve Levitt, in which
people gathered with or without guitars and suggested songs to sing together somewhat at
random; an old time string jam, very friendly to beginners; square dancing, complete with caller
and live music, usually very well attended; a songwriters workshop; a craft circle (non-musical);
and for a few months, a screening of a documentary film about music in the Resource Center.
The choices varied somewhat from month to month, and new ideas were periodically tried out.
One First Friday I attended included a reception for the opening of a new exhibit in the small art
gallery. The headlining event was a show in the concert hall, typically an Old Town School
teacher, or someone with a close connection to the School. This show was preceded by
performances by student ensembles, such as the Beatles Ensemble, and usually a student open
mic. Attendees of First Fridays appeared by and large to be students (present and past), while
faculty and staff served as mainly as leaders and facilitators.

Overall, the event had the feel of both an open house—an invitation for anyone to step in
and experience the Old Town School scene—and a casual Friday evening social. Participants
had complete freedom to wander from event to event, stopping to chat in the hallways and
lobbies. Even the most formal event of the evening, the headline performer, was quite a casual
affair, with audience members coming and going.

Concerts and Other Performances

Weekend concert series. “I’d rather present a rare appearance by an obscure African
band than sell out with a big name sure thing. The concert business is full of big, lumbering
dinosaurs who are only interested in the bottom line. We’re like the happy rodents running
around as the dinosaurs fall” (Colleen Miller, in OTSFM 2003 Annual Report, 4). To some
Chicagoans, and certainly among performing artists around the country, the Old Town School
may be better known as a performance venue than as a school. In the mid-2000s, the Old Town School was putting on 120 concerts a year on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings, featuring performers from around the North America and the world.

Colleen Miller, as Director of Concerts and Events, was responsible for booking the concerts.

Probably the unsung most valuable player of the Old Town School of Folk Music was Colleen Miller[....] But she’s somebody who is the biggest fan of music that the world has ever encountered. She is so aggressive and so all over the musical map. I’ve never known anybody who knew as much about music as she does. And how much she enjoys it and goes out—talk about busman’s holiday, she’s always going off somewhere to see somebody else, because it contributes to her overall view. (Miles interview 2005a)

Since she was hired by Jim Hirsch in 1995, Miller has had an enormous personal influence on the musical tastes purveyed by the Old Town School throughout the Chicago region, and by extension, on what Chicago concertgoers understand to be “folk music”; Chicago Magazine dubbed her Chicago’s “Queen of Folk” in 2003. “She has a brand name herself, though she doesn’t like to talk to media,” according to Gail Tyler (G. Tyler interview 2005). Indeed, she was one of the few staff members reluctant to agree to an interview with me, though in the end we had a very comfortable conversation.

Before 1995, Jim Hirsch had been booking the concerts himself; there were not many, and very few international acts, as Hirsch did not have much time for the task and the space at Armitage was small. He would often rely on tours put together by other organizations, such as the “Masters of Folk Violin” tour that the National Council for the Traditional Arts offered at one point (Hirsch interview 2005). Hiring Colleen Miller meant that the Old Town School could establish a real concert series—“our ability and desire and capacity to do more expanded a whole
A self-described “rocker girl,” her experience before joining OTSFM was in running a rock club called Biddy Mulligan’s with her husband in the North Side neighborhood of Rogers Park in the early 1990s, booking classic acts such as Leon Russell, Booker T. and the M.G.s, Blue Öyster Cult, and Tito Puente. Colleen had moved to Chicago in 1986 from the Detroit area, where she grew up. As a child, she danced, studying jazz and tap dance, fairly typically of dance-inclined girls of her time and place (she was forty years old in 2005), and has since taken nearly every dance class offered at the Old Town School, by her own estimate.

She credited Chicago rock radio station WXRT with opening her ears to the Mexican group Los Lobos, whom she first saw perform in the 1980s before the group hit mainstream success with the film La Bamba—“and I swear, that was a real turning point for me. Like, God I love this music!” She recalled, “They did the whole show with acoustic instruments, but they rocked! It was an awesome night! I was three people from the front row, and they closed with ‘La Bamba,’ and people were waving their flags and crying and stuff[….] Still to this day, Mexican son is my very favorite music” (Miller interview 2005a). This discovery launched her on the path to discovering a world of music beyond rock. She described her current musical tastes broadly as “roots music that rocks.”

Colleen Miller described the music she brings in to the Old Town School as “roots music from all over the globe.” Her approach was largely instinctive, guided by certain core
requirements, and although she often consulted with colleagues for their recommendations and opinions, the final decisions were hers and required no one else’s approval.

First of all, they have to be excellent musicians. And we try and represent a really diverse group of people[...] So we’ll try and balance different international acts with, we want to have a healthy dose of Americana and singer-songwriters and things that are traditionally called “folk music.” But at the same time, we don’t have such a limited view that we don’t look beyond that. It’s really roots music from around the world. You know, when I’m booking the season, I might then all of a sudden notice in, like the month of October, hey, I’m almost done with October and there aren’t any women! Or, it’s all a bunch of white guys or something. And so I’ll kind of switch gears and try and balance things out and make it interesting for our audience and try to attract various audiences so that we don’t have the same people coming here every weekend. (Miller interview 2005a)

Miller also maintained the tradition of bringing in favorite singer-songwriters—the same musicians, or types of musicians, that had been performing at the Old Town School for decades, like Greg Brown, Cheryl Wheeler, Garnet Rogers, or The Sons of the Never Wrong (a Chicago trio). These and other folk revival favorites, like Cajun bands BeauSoleil and Balfa Toujours, would play approximately every couple of years, kept in a sort of rotation. Increasingly, however, some of the recurring favorites were not of that ilk; rock musician Alejandro Escovedo, for example, or Malian singer Rokia Traoré.

During the fall of 2004, the thirty-three concerts on offer included Utah Philips (one of the regulars, a storyteller and singer of traditional and especially labor movement songs of the U.S.); Portuguese fado singer Cristina Branco; Dervish (Irish traditional music with a contemporary edge); Jamesie King of Scratch (Caribbean scratch band); Lowen and Navarro (rock-styled singer-songwriter duo); a “Piano Night” featuring local blues pianists Henry Gray, Pinetop Perkins and Geraldine Gay; Woody’s son Arlo Guthrie; and R&B and spiritual singer Mavis Staples. The concert line-up typically also featured a few local acts of enough significance to fill the Concert Hall with a few loyal fans. And every few months, Old Town
School teachers, staff and friends put on a collaborative show to celebrate or commemorate important individuals or events. On September 24, 2004, for example, a tribute to Steve Goodman was held, followed a month later by a show in honor of children’s singer and Folkways artist Ella Jenkins’s eightieth birthday, at which she herself performed (with extraordinary energy for her age).

In addition, the School kept up a steady schedule of kids’ concerts, usually scheduled for Sunday afternoons. Winter and spring of 2005, for example, saw shows by Ella Jenkins, Justin Roberts (a Chicago-based singer-songwriter), as well as two Wigggleworms twentieth anniversary reunion concerts featuring distinct lineups of a dozen or so current and former Wigggleworms teachers. The kids’ shows given by accordion rock band They Might Be Giants from time to time are legendary.

Rock music proved to be an interesting grey area in booking choices. When I asked her what kind of music would not be appropriate at the Old Town School, she immediately answered, “I think anything too loud is just not right for our room.” This obviously disqualifies much rock music, which she felt maybe didn’t “belong here as part of our mission.” Still, she would book some rock acts, if they were “pretty rootsy,” like Escovedo, or Lowen and Navarro. “But it is 2005, so the lines I think are very blurred, as to what’s rock and what isn’t.” Occasionally, she brought in “some of the quiet, what you might call the lo-fi indie pop. Groups like Cat Power, or Smog. Groups that are quiet and definitely considered rock.” This would be mainly for acoustical reasons: “they’re so quiet, audiences love an occasional opportunity to see them in a listening room, where you’re sitting there and you can hear a pin drop” as opposed to the clubs where such acts would usually play. “But it does have a little added benefit of bringing in these eighteen-to-twenty-five-year-olds into our hall, and they might pick up class catalog, and
you know, maybe they want to start taking bellydance class, or a variety—who knows what they’re gonna take. In a way, I can justify it by just opening doors to new group of people” (Miller interview 2005a).

Although she did not say this explicitly, the way she talked about her decision-making process in our interview suggested that, once her own aesthetic instincts were satisfied by an act’s excellence and uniqueness, she tended to think in terms of audience types, rather any system of musical genre or category.

Definitely the singer-songwriter audiences are very different from the West African audiences. Different people like different music. And then you might get a lot of crossover between a bluegrass audience and an old-time American string band music audience and a Celtic music audience. It’s kind of similar instrumentation, you might get a lot of bleed between those groups. But there does seem to be some types. (Miller interview 2005a)

Often she would make a point of bringing in something new in order to reach out to a particular audience she felt was being underserved. That spring, for example, she tried out a concert of Indian classical music, assisted by David Roche’s expertise, in hopes of drawing in the Indian Americans who lived and/or shopped on nearby Devon Avenue. “I think our room is perfect for Indian classical music. We haven’t presented very much of it. And I think once the audience that likes that music finds our room, that they will respond very, very positively.” Goals like this required her to prioritize the new element, before the schedule became flooded with offers from musicians and agents already used to playing at OTSFM; “it’s a little bit of a gatekeeper role” (ibid.). Not all concert-goers do gravitate to particular types of music, however.

Now what’s interesting at the Old Town School is there’s a core group of people that will go to everything or anything. And it just depends on what nights work into their schedule. There are a lot of members that come here every weekend. And if I happen to have a weekend—it seems, to me—if one of the weekends is really international and it’s nobody they’ve ever heard of but it works into their schedule, they’ll come. It’s very cool. (ibid.)
Indeed, this approach to booking seems to bring in fairly diverse audiences, more ethnically and racially diverse than the student body. A 2003 concert audience analysis showed that only 70% of the audience overall was white, compared with 80% of the student body in 2004 (statistics provided by Gail Tyler). The audience skewed heavily towards higher education levels, with only 24% of audience members lacking a Bachelor’s degree, but was not necessarily affluent; more fell in the $25,000-$49,000 income bracket than any other (32%). Audience age was more evenly distributed, but nearly half of the audience (46%) was between 35 and 54. Unsurprisingly, the concerts categorized by Tyler as “Traditional Folk” or “Hip Folk” attracted the highest percentage of whites (94% and 89% respectively).

Amongst artists and agents, Miller found the Old Town School to be very well known, with a good reputation. She found that artists are generally impressed with the experience of performing at the Old Town School, from its acoustics to the concert staff’s hospitality to the quality of the audiences. Part of that experience was the participatory spirit of the audience, always willing to join in on the chorus, or whatever seemed appropriate, something I had observed at show after show. I was curious to know if Colleen specifically prepared performers for this, but it appeared to emerge organically from the shared Old Town School ethos.

No, I haven’t. And people like to sing here and I think they might get a vibe here when they’re on our stage, a response vibe, a participatory vibe. Our audience is making eye contact with them, and nodding when they’re talking, and smiling and laughing and clapping when they do a good solo. So I think it’s very conducive to asking the audience to sing along, because you can see that this audience is into it! And that is a really cool thing about the audiences at the Old Town School. And I think even people who come here who aren’t that way over time become that way. Sort of like going to church or something—everyone’s singing. If everyone’s singing, why aren’t you singing? You know? (Miller interview 2005a)

The Old Town School did not profit from its concert series. Ticket prices in 2004-2005 generally ranged from about $18 to $30 with discounts offered for Old Town School members,
seniors and children. If tickets were sold for 325 of the 400 seats, overhead, staffing, equipment, advertising, artist fees, accommodations and all other expenses could be covered. A popular performer could be scheduled for two shows in one night, earning bonus income. The goal each year was to break even and, taking into account donations to the School earmarked for specific shows or the concert series in general, this goal was usually achieved (see Figure 6.2 and Table 6.1). The concert series was of course valuable and appreciated by the OTSFM community for its own sake. However, it also served as a significant defining statement about the Old Town School.

Because it’s not the classes at the School that the public would perceive as the definition of the School as much, as it was the concerts. Who are we presenting? Those are the ads. It’s the ads that say “Old Town School of Folk Music presents”—that’s how you define who you are. If you have guitar and even if you have an African drumming class or these other international types of music, they don’t have as much impact as the public seeing these—especially when they’re more well-known—artists from all across the world coming to be presented by the School. [Colleen], through her genuine expertise, presented not because she was told to do so—that was what was so neat about her I think—I mean, she took it all in and got a sense of what Jim Hirsch was about, got a sense of what I was about, got a sense of what the School was all about, and complemented all of that with her own ability, and her own depth of knowledge to create these concert series that, in fact, both did this backward-looking thing, like bringing in the likes of Glenn Campbell, and bringing in the likes of all these other characters who people’ve never heard of. (Miles interview 2005a)

Gail Tyler saw the concerts specifically as a marketing tool for classes, memberships and donations, in terms of their role in the financial structure of the School. Because of their potential to draw in new audiences, not to mention their frequency, concerts were more frequently advertised than any other aspect of OTSFM programming; a strip ad listing upcoming concerts was run weekly in local papers, for example. This kept the Old Town School name visible, with the word “school” continuing to suggest the central mission of the institution, and concert audiences were always given a pitch for classes, offered course catalogs and, at many
shows, entered into a drawing (by way of filling out a short, demographic survey) to win a free class. Concerts also attracted sponsorships and donations in a way that classes could not, Gail reported, which could indirectly contribute to all of the School’s programs. As she saw it, “Every event is opportunity for the brand name” (G. Tyler interview 2005).

**Festivals and special events.** Ever year since 1998, the Old Town School hosted the two-day Chicago Folk and Roots Festival in July in nearby Welles Park, a block south of the School. It would draw in tens of thousands of visitors and required a huge investiture of staff and volunteer time and energy to execute and organize. Because admission was by suggested donation and people were free to come and go, OTSFM never had an accurate head count; Colleen Miller’s rough estimate for attendance at the 2005 festival was 28,000, a couple thousand more than the previous year (Miller interview 2005b). “Folk and Roots is sort of for me is like a big marker. Because I used to do a lot of festivals, and I always saw them as big cultural vitamin pills. That you get this *dose* of intensity and if it’s done well, it can really resonate for the rest of the year” (Roche interview 2005a).

The festival featured performances by nationally and internationally known acts, with an emphasis on “world music” (i.e., various pop-fusions with non-North American traditions), at a mainstage in the center of the park; in 2005, the headliners included Los Angeles-based Latin hip-hop group Ozomatli; Tinarawen, a Tuareg world beat band from Mali; soul musician Otis Clay; and Texan rock songwriter Alejandro Escovedo. Several smaller stages dotted throughout the park (set up in open-sided tents or, in one case, an existing gazebo) featured mostly local performers, many of whom had longstanding associations with the School. The staff and teachers had their own stage on Lincoln Avenue to showcase their “extra-curricular” acts; a few advanced or former students also performed there. Another stage was devoted to children’s
performances, with a children’s crafts area nearby. In addition to performances, workshops were offered all day. The dance tent was a particular popular stop, where various dance traditions were taught and then tried out, often to live music. The stretch of Lincoln Avenue between Welles Park and the public library was blocked off to traffic to become an avenue for food and crafts vendors—and a relief from the hot dust rising off the trampled field of the park.

In 2005, for the first time, OTSFM teachers Jimmy Tomasello and Steve Levitt led a traditional sing-along, billed as such, from the mainstage on Saturday afternoon, singing classic favorites for such an affair like “This Land Is Your Land.” Attending this event, I found myself with a small group of OTSFM staff in the audience who were enthusiastically rocking out to even the most hackneyed songs. The mainstage also hosted the finals of the Annual Midwest Fiddle Championship from 2003 on, presented by the Fiddle Club of the World with a multicultural outlook. When I attended in 2005, the winner was a fiddle and banjo duo playing in an old-time American style; the second-place winner was a Mexican duo.

Certain student ensembles were featured at the gazebo at the far western edge of the festival grounds; the Beatles Ensemble and the Soul Ensemble were predictable favorites there, and though their performances were not overtly billed as participatory events, it was expected that the audience would make requests and sing and dance along to Beatles and Motown favorites (small children would sometimes climb up onto the gazebo itself to dance). At the Soul Ensemble performance I observed (and, necessarily, participated in) in 2005, audiences and even passers-by were not just invited but impelled to join in. Explaining that all ensemble members are required to sing, whether miked or not, teacher Bill Brickey told the audience, “Not that I don’t need the money,” he said, “but if y’all out there aren’t singing, you’re gonna owe me $10.” He then hailed two guys who happened to by walking along the path in front of the gazebo:
“Hold on there—you have just entered a groove zone and you cannot just walk through.” They stayed through the next song.

The Folk and Roots Festival is the Old Town School’s own, but the School was also participating annually in the Chicago World Music Festival, an event put on by the City of Chicago’s Department of Cultural Affairs every September since 1999, showcasing both traditional and “world beat” musicians and dancers from all over the world. Free performances were hosted in more than a dozen different venues throughout the city, ranging from Orchestra Hall, to Borders Bookstore, to the HotHouse (a world music club, now closed), to the South Shore Cultural Center; OTSFM was a natural fit, as a well-known Chicago venue for hearing international artists (Vietze 2006).

The Old Town School also hosted a few smaller, less regular events, somewhere between a festival and a concert in scale, such as the Festival of Mexican Son and the Trad Fest. On a more or less semi-annual basis, Juan Dies and Colleen Miller had been organizing a weekend celebration of Mexican son. Miller developed the program, while Dies and his band, Sones de Mexico, which performs son in many different regional styles, provided the artistic resources.

It wasn’t meant to be an annual event. It was just going to be a one-time thing. The Festival of Latin Music had ended because—you know, Colleen will say that La Peña was competing too much with it. It was also becoming a big dinosaur because the cost of the airlines and all the visas had become too massive. So the Festival culminated on, I think it was its seventeenth year with a television broadcast on public television and big, full production. (Dies interview 2005)

In May of 2005, the festival consisted of Saturday and Sunday night concerts featuring three professional folkloric Mexican bands, preceded by a Friday night fandango, which offered workshops on various instruments, poetry, song, and dance, and ended with a group dance where everyone performed together. That year, fifty people took part in the fandango and 700 attended
the two concerts, which Miller regarded as “a great turnout” (Miller interview 2005b). The participants and audience were mostly Latino (it was unknown how many were Mexican).

An old time string band event, first billed as “Triple Rad Trad Fest” in January 2005, has been occurring roughly annually since then. Colleen Miller came up with the idea.

That was a little concept I had because I really like a lot of this new generation of string band players, Old Time American music players[....] It would be really great if we could create some kind of an event where there’s a buzz, people can participate and just feel what the music is all about. So I was definitely for that one, thinking about developing an audience—not even developing. Calling out that audience. With an offer that they couldn’t refuse. Which is, three great bands, plus an opportunity to participate with them the night before and dance and everything else. And that was very audience-driven in my mind, because I wanted to solidify a group of people that would be as smitten with the music as I am. (Miller interview 2005a)

The first Trad Fest featured Uncle Earl, Foghorn String Band, and the Mammals—all young players infusing a contemporary sensibility, in particular, a rock-influenced rhythmic drive, into traditional repertoire and styles. In 2005, it consisted of a Friday night open house offering multiple workshops taught by the band members, a square dance, and a potluck dinner, followed by a Saturday night concert featuring all three bands. With 250 in attendance on Friday and a full house Saturday, it was clearly a repeatable success.

Community Programs

The quest for greater ethnic and racial diversity was pursued under the banner of “Community Programs” during this period, in place of the rather controversial term “outreach.” At the time of Roche’s arrival, diversification efforts had themselves diversified to a point that was beginning to seem unsustainable, especially in light of the reduction in available grant funds. Building on his earlier success in attracting new Latino audiences and students, Juan Dies began broadening his sights after the move to the new building. A “Community Ambassadors”
program assisted him in reaching other ethnic communities by offering a small stipend to well-connected individuals within these communities to develop programs and relationships. This was modeled on the cultural liaison strategy in place when Dies had arrived in the early 1990s. David Roche was not comfortable with this approach, however; an instance where he firmly sided with the curatorial over the entrepreneurial approach to programming.

There’s either a patronizing quality to it, of calling somebody else an “ambassador,” or there’s an entrepreneurial view that somebody who gets called an ambassador gets to then do something in the community, or has this—I guess lord it over other people in a certain way[…] See, what was happening in the community ambassadors program from my point of view was that there were people who were very interested in their own careers, or in being entrepreneurs, or in being presenters. And they were the ones, the community “leaders,” so-called, that were being accessed to run programs here. Rather than overview like, well, what is the traditional music of a particular culture? Do we have it in house? What are we missing? Who do we need to get to the table so that we can cover those things? It was a completely different approach. (Roche interview 2005a)

The program did allow temporary expansion into new areas. For a few years, the Old Town School was putting on an annual festival of Pacific Islander music, dance and food. They also hosted a Native American program for four or five years in the fall called “Equinox.” “And, yeah, we had a great response. They also said there’s a lot of powwows already, we don’t need the Old Town School to organize a powwow. We want to know what are Native Americans doing today. Reggae, rock and roll, and traditional also. But they could all be part of the same thing” (Dies interview 2005). A Korean American community ambassador, herself a rock musician, developed a series called “Asian Americans: Rising,” featuring contemporary music by Asian Americans, mostly in mainstream popular genres like rock and jazz. “So we had groups coming in that represented the interests of a sector of […] a broader Asian American population—but had nothing to do with Asian American genres. Had all to do with American
genres. And so that was a very different orientation from how I had been involved with so-called Asian American programming” (Roche interview 2005a).

They were also telling us that the importance for the Asian community was to see that there was Asian participation at the School, that there were some teachers of Asian descent at the School, but it didn’t really matter if they ended up taking classes from them or not, as long as there were, they knew that there was some presence at the School. There didn’t have to be, like, a ribbon dance class. That wasn’t important. (Dies interview 2005)

The series was not successful, however. “It didn’t draw anybody. No audience, some of the acts were really too loud for the hall. It wasn’t well curated, in a way. And it was not sustainable” (Roche interview 2005a).

The strategic planning process led to a decision to re-focus diversification efforts on Latinos and African Americans, building on the existing strength of the Latino-oriented programming, primarily the La Peña series “which was already there, but really we’re acknowledging a depth of curatorial wisdom and experience,” and prioritizing work with African American communities, “with the idea that we need to really honor and support and build on the African American roots of American music and African diaspora” (Roche interview 2005a). These were the same two priorities arrived at by the OTSFM leadership in the early 1990s.

La Peña. The Wednesday night concert series Juan Dies had begun in 1995 continued as the core of Latino-targeted programming into the new decade. Each series featured a diverse line-up of multi-ethnic Latino and Latin American music and dance groups, most Chicago- or Midwest-based. Free admission helped attract audiences to new audiences and new sounds, which Dies marketed under genre names rather than group names to increase accessibility.

There is a mariachi night, featuring Mariachi Guadalajara. And that helps to also expose a genre and a group that people might not be familiar with. So we have maybe a group that’s called Los Escondidos, and you don’t know what they do. But if it’s called “Tango Night, featuring Los Escondidos”—it’s helped us present a lot of unknown groups that otherwise wouldn’t have attracted anybody. And
that was another goal we had. We wanted the series to attract people, and not the artists in particular. (Dies interview 2005)

The 2004 La Peña season included Spanish flamenco (a recurring favorite, featuring teachers and students in the School’s own flamenco program), Latin rock, mariachi, Latin jazz, bolero, Puerto Rican bomba, Brazilian Carnaval, and salsa, among other genres and themes.

Latinos were reliably in the majority in La Peña’s audience—60%, according to a 2003 audience analysis.

And that was good. It helped to establish the event as being owned by that community. And the artists that went up on stage, some which did not speak English very well, felt very comfortable speaking in Spanish to the audience in general. Even though there may have been a few who didn’t understand what they were saying. And occasionally somebody will complain and say, will leave and say “I don’t understand what they’re talking about,” will march out. Very rarely. But still, it is, they’re getting the full experience of being in a foreign environment! [...] You know, they’re getting a real experience. And it creates a warmth. And the audience feels at home at that point. Because the artist has established their—the cultural…the culture of the room. (Dies interview 2005)

Although it is impossible to prove a causal relationship between the success of La Peña, Festival of Mexican Son (see above) and similar programming with Latino enrollment in classes, this enrollment did stay between 7% and 11% between 2001 and 2006, making it the largest student minority group.

AfroFolk. The renewed focus on African Americans mandated a new hire. “We understood that it was important, it was almost crucial, that a member of the target community lead that program. That as much as I could try and do a good job with it, I was an outsider. So eventually we were able to hire Delano Androzzo through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts” (Dies interview 2005). Through his involvement in Brazilian capoeira, Androzzo had been organizing events around the city, gradually expanding into other genres, planning events at nightclubs that featured music and dance of the African diaspora. It was at an event he
was hosting that he first met Juan Dies, whose band he had hired to play. The two got into a long conversation about Hispanics and African Americans and race issues. “We got to talking about African Diaspora. Then Juan told me there’s this position coming up where he worked[...]. He’s like ‘I think you’d be perfect for it just based on our conversation and what you’ve been doing and what you’re doing out and about—you’d probably be perfect for this position’” (D. Androzzo interview 2005).

Androzzo was hired as Community Program Manager in late 2002. “My job was mostly to work with artists, to bring them here to the school, to organize a concert series that would attract people of various African descents from all over Chicago to the school. That’s what the job description entailed—all about diversity and making the school more diverse. The base of the position was to attract new audiences” (D. Androzzo interview 2005). At first, it was a temporary, grant-funded, contract position, but later became a full-time permanent position.

Alongside the Pacific Islander, Asian American and Native American programs, a program targeted at African American audiences had also been launched in 1999. Under the somewhat unwieldy title “Voices of a New Black Millenium,” the series had featured “various funk, spoken word stuff, a lot of R & B” in an experimental vein (D. Androzzo interview 2005). It was developed by Marvin Tate, working on a consultant basis, who “had a very avant-garde, crazy idea that what was missing in programming in the African American community was ‘black-ternative,’ or alternative music. That didn’t seem to work. It was very esoteric, also, in the African American community” (Dies interview 2005). Androzzo and Tate worked together planning the “Voices” series for one year, after which it seemed redundant to pay two people for the same function, and Androzzo took over the programming (D. Androzzo interview 2005).
It was very important to Delano that the series be renamed to something shorter and more timely (the turn of the millennium having passed). Together, he and Juan arrived at AfroFolk. “It just seemed to fit with what we’re trying to do—connecting folk music to people of African descent” (D. Androzzo interview 2005). The name deliberately challenged the negative stereotype African Americans tended to associate with the word “folk.” “So AfroFolk, even though Jim was already gone, followed that same spirit, saying let’s take this head-on and redefine ‘folk.’ Let’s call it AfroFolk. We’re gonna put that ‘folk’ right out there. And show people what it could mean” (Dies interview 2005).

My approach was more of the diaspora, to bring in different elements from all over, as a whole. Not to focus on, say, African American music. The job description was to attract more African Americans to the School, but I wasn’t in total agreement with that. I felt that it wasn’t about just African Americans, but people of African descent who live in Chicago. That would include African Americans, Jamaicans, Brazilians, Africans. That was my focus, both in our target as well as the artists that would perform in the series. That’s still my approach, the way I see it as being most effective in terms of bringing the music to life. (D. Androzzo interview 2005)

The AfroFolk program, begun in 2003, was centered on a free concert series called AfroFolk Live similar in structure to La Peña; in fact, it would replace the latter at the Old Town School on Wednesday evenings for periods of several weeks. For other periods of time it would be held on Saturdays at the South Shore Cultural Center to more conveniently serve the large African American communities on the South Side. Like La Peña, AfroFolk Live shows presented a multi-ethnic vision of the African diaspora. The spring 2005 series at the South Shore Cultural Center included a performances of Mandingo kora, West Indian folk dance, reggae music, an Afrobeat/Afrofunk/reggae/Ewe fusion band, breakdancing, capoeira, tumbling and, somewhat inexplicably, Australian didgeridoo.
AfroFolk also included free workshops by master musicians, usually directly connected to the concerts and offered on the same day. “I wanted to do that so we could tie the idea of the School—this being about learning about music. I felt that we really needed a workshop component to bridge the gap between the music being made on stage and how people learn that music” (D. Androzzo interview 2005). “And his approach has been developing more chances for somebody to meet somebody from Senegal, that’s gonna come in and play a kora and show you what a griot does, and be in touch with that part of their heritage. And that’s sort of attractive, in a sense” (Dies interview 2005).

AfroFolk was successfully attracting an African American audience and garnered positive feedback from them. “We probably get about—on average, between the North and South Sides, it’s about 63% African American. On the South Side, it’s probably closer to 80 to 90%; up here it’s probably closer to fifty-fifty, depending on the genre of music. The audience is different every week, because every week we have a different kind of music” (D. Androzzo interview 2005). Jazz and blues drew the fewest African Americans, while dance programs were the most popular. Intriguingly, the audience was 70% female. Partly because the South Shore events were offered on weekends, more families with children attended and, Androzzo assumed, more people who lived on the South Side. The Wednesday shows at Lincoln Square late in the evening drew “more singles here, more couples. I think maybe on average a younger audience because you get twenty-, thirty-year-olds. I do see people from the South Side coming up north. You know, I see the same people on both sides of the city. So some people will definitely travel just to come for the series and will support” (ibid.)

Together, La Peña and AfroFolk drew a total audience of 9,700 in 2004 (OTSFM 2004 Annual Report, 6). But they could only do so much to shift the perception of the Old Town
School as a “white” institution. Overtly racist attitudes were not in evidence within the walls of the School.

As a black woman, walking through the halls here, I’ve never felt any type of negative energy. Like, “what is she doing here? This is folk music for white people!” You know what I mean? [laughing] That’s never happened! “Go to the South Side!” That’s never happened. So I do feel like it is an open place for...for people of all different colors. I do know that it’s been a—one of the initiatives has been to diversify. And to get more people of color through the doors and more people taking classes. I feel that, especially since Delano has been doing the AfroFolk Series, there have been more black people kind of coming through the door and registering—there has been an up in registering of blacks in classes. So I do feel that it’s growing. (Y. Androzzo interview 2005)

Among the faculty and staff, however, there were only a small handful of African American, Asian or Latino teachers, and only four minority administrators: Juan Dies, Theater Program Manager Chris Arnold, Delano Androzzo and Yolanda Androzzo, the latter three having been hired since 2002. The “face” of the Old Town School was still predominantly white, and little was being done to change that significantly.

I do feel that there is an unawareness of…and maybe not un-awareness—I think everybody’s aware that the initiative is to diversify more, with staff, with programming. But whose responsibility is it? And what are the active steps to actually do it? So those haven’t been put in place. There’s the awareness, but human resources doesn’t really know how. There’s no action plan[...]. So, when brought to the table, the answer to that is, “Well, finding someone who teaches guitar, and sings, is difficult in itself.” Ok, well, if that’s the case, then is there going to be a mentorship? Is there going to be a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? Is there going to be—a mentorship? If we want to do this, how will we? So, perhaps the desire is not strong enough. If it is a point, a strategic point of change, which it’s been stated that it is by David Roche, then you’ve got to have everybody on board with you to actually make that happen. And I think perhaps really to make those changes, you might need an outside person to kind of come in and help plan it and help do it. ‘Cause everybody’s got a full plate. (ibid.)

Youth Outreach

The Old Town School has had a presence in schools and other community institutions on a charitable basis almost since the beginning. As the nineties progressed, these programs became
more formalized and professionalized and less ad hoc, along with everything else the School did. Since at least the mid-nineties, grant funding and surplus profits had funded a staff position to administer these programs. In 2005, there were two major programs running: the Global Roots Program in the public schools, and the Field Trips to OTSFM. All shows and curriculum were “steeped in the Illinois State Standards for fine arts and/or social studies” (Y. Androzzo interview 2005).

Yolanda Androzzo, Delano’s sister, was hired in the summer of 2003 to take over from Eric Delli Bovi (who then became Development Director) as Youth Outreach Manager. She described her responsibilities as “to coordinate, more or less hire, look at the artists, choose the artist, see who’s the best fit. Coordinate in particular with, it could be principals to teachers, making sure the environment at the schools are safe, workable, clean, for kids and students. With the fieldtrip series, it’s coordinating with artists, as well as, it could be buses and teachers, front desk staff, volunteers” (Y. Androzzo interview 2005. Like Delano, Yolanda had not been particularly familiar with the Old Town School before she was hired, though she had the benefit of her brother’s experience. “I’d been hearing about their programming and what he was doing for about a year, and I’d been through the doors before, but I’d never taken classes here before I started working here” (ibid.)

She came to the position as an artist, as had Delano. After earning a degree in acting from DePaul University and working as an actor for a while, she began teaching theatre, poetry and art to children in the Chicago Public Schools through a program called Urban Gateways. “It was always a desire of mine—I’ve always had a knack for working with kids—but then it became a major love. So I was actually teaching a theatre program at a school on the West
Side—Afrocentric theatre program—when I heard about this opening.” Moving from classroom to classroom, she gained experience coordinating with teachers.

So when I interviewed for the job, my interest, really, was to get more experience as an administrator, to really learn how it works. How are programs funded? Why are programs funded? To grow professionally, because I myself am an artist. The more you know about how it works, how that business works, the more you can work as an individual, too. One of the main reasons I think I was hired, as opposed to an administrator, someone who wasn’t an artist, was the fact that I could relate to artists. Was the fact that I was an artist, am an artist, and had been an artist within the schools. (Y. Androzzo interview 2005)

Yolanda and Delano were born on the South Side and grew up in Chicago Heights, a south suburb with large African American and Hispanic populations. Their parents were very supportive of their interests in the arts, and they had poets and songwriters in their extended family. Though she identified as African American, Yolanda clarified that “it’s just a term that may or may not at all times actually describe me.” Growing up, she did not always feel like she fit neatly into any one category. “I was kind of a mixture of all these things—you know, black, white, Cherokee—and so I didn’t quite fit in. And because I didn’t quite fit in with any group, I learned how to walk my own color line. Which was like—my color line was really about anybody that was cool.” In her thirties at the time of our interview, her self-identification had become more flexible: “The older I get, first and foremost, I’m a human being. And my experience is consistent of being a woman, of being a person of color, of being a person of multi-ethnicities, of being an artist. And more than anything, I really consider myself to be someone who stands outside of being defined. You know? Because I define me” (Y. Androzzo interview 2005).

Global Roots Program. The Old Town School supported nine OTSFM-affiliated artists to tour amongst third-grade classrooms at nine schools, in two sessions a year, to present music and dance in coordination with the social studies, language arts and fine arts curriculum already in
place. Participating classrooms would be visited by a different artist every Tuesday. Selected in part to represent Chicago’s major immigrant groups, in 2005 these artists, with their topics, included:

- Anacron: Breakdancing
- Carlos Cornier: Roots of Rhythm! (Rhythm and percussion of the African diaspora)
- Vaune Blalock: Dancin’-N-Time, Story Time! (Lamba dance in the African diaspora)
- Patti Ecker: Songs from the Prairie! (Period folk songs from 19th-century Illinois)
- Reggio “the Hoofer” McLaughlin: Sound in Motion! Tap & Percussive Dance
- Michael Miles: Send Your Song to the President! (Songwriting, with emphasis on topical themes and language)
- Nelson Sosa: The Key to Latin America / La Llave de LatinoAmérica (A passage through the sounds and rhythms of Latin America)
- Jimmy Tomasello: The Blues Had a Baby and They Called it Rock & Roll
- Mazurka Wojciechowska: Swingin’ Slavic Tunes!

At the conclusion of each session, all the classes from the nine schools would gather at the Old Town School for a “Jamboree,” where all nine artists would perform together on stage. “So you’ve got schools from the North Side, from the South Side, from the West Side—all these different colors of kids, races of kids, ethnic backgrounds, here in the theater experiencing this, often their first experience in a theater” (Y. Androzzo interview 2005).

Third grade had been chosen by Delli Bovi as the appropriate grade level for this project because, in the Chicago Public Schools, that is the year students begin studying immigrant history and Chicago history, as well as concepts of community and some music content, such as the names of different instruments. “So for us it just seemed like a natural fit. Since they’re studying about immigration to the United States, well, we teach all these music forms of different cultures, so it fits right in. If one school is studying about Latino culture, well, we’ll try to have Carlos go in, or Nelson Sosa come in, at that particular time” (Y. Androzzo interview 2005). In addition to educational content—music, social studies and language content delivered through
the efficacious mode of music-making—the program served to promote the Old Town School and its mission. The artists “have that Old Town philosophy, and they talk about the classes that we have here, so it’s kind of a means of, it’s a point of entry for students to get to know about Old Town, teachers to get to know about Old Town. But it’s really about taking what we do here and educating that young population about dance and culture, and music and culture” (ibid.). In 2004, 1400 students were served by this program, and participating schoolteachers received free OTSFM arts classes, concert tickets, and supporting curricular materials.

Two residency programs were also offered. The Global Roots Expansion Program was available to Global Roots schools interested in a longer-term involvement, offering a nine-week residency by one of the nine artists. The Wiggleworms program also offered residency, including a particularly strong partnership with the Carol Robertson Center for Learning in Little Village, run by Ann Marie Akin and Linda Robertson.

And the kids are so attached to them ‘cause they’ve been—and they learn their numbers through it. They learn Spanish through it. They learn high and low through it, they learn fast and slow through it, they learn their colors through it. They really learn so many educational concepts through song, which I think is one of the strongest—that and rap, and rhythm, poetry—are the strongest ways you can—one of the best ways you can teach. (Y. Androzzo interview 2005)

There was also a Wiggleworms residency for teen moms at local high schools.

So, often there are childcare centers, infant care centers at high schools[…] There’ve been different Wiggleworms instructors that will go in and work with the teens and their children, to show them how to incorporate music in their lives, and just to make the feel of a life of a child and parent stronger. This past year, Shana was at Westinghouse, and that staff was just amazing, with really supporting her and getting the teens involved. And the little kids just love it—they’re like, “Oh, music time! Music time!” Because so often, a teacher will put on a tape, but it’s a lot different when a child is actually sitting in a circle and singing songs, relating to each other and using instruments. And shaking little instruments and tambourines and moving. So I think it can be a life-changing experience, and often is. (ibid.)
Field Trips to the Old Town School. Throughout the school year, the Old Town School hosted field trips for children on weekday mornings, almost on a weekly basis, for a total of thirty shows a year. Most of the performers were Old Town School instructors, but outside artists would be brought in as well. Again, the performances were conscientiously multi-ethnic.

Shows from the winter and spring of 2005 included Delano Androzzo’s capoeira group, Gingarte Capoeira; Malachi Thomson and his Freebop Jazz Band; “Poetry Slam 101” with Young Chicago Authors; The American String Band; “Bluegrass, Traveling America’s Musical Highway” with Chris Walz and Keith Baumann; a bilingual Cinco de Mayo celebration with Juan Dies and Joel Frankel; and “Songs of Struggle: Sixties Protest Songs” with Jimmy Tomasello and Steve Levitt.

The field trips involved significant marketing and outreach; Yolanda’s mailing list reached 5,000 Chicago-area schools, mostly public schools, as well as an early childhood education list to infant care centers, preschools and community colleges (Y. Androzzo interview 2005). They were not offered for free, however; tickets were five dollars per child, and bus transportation added about three dollars. “Eight dollars is often something that a family can’t afford.” Some shows were underwritten, to lessen the burden, and sometimes principals or more affluent parents would cover the entire bill for a classroom’s attendance at a particular show. “But the bulk of it is kids getting the money out of their pockets—their parents pockets” (ibid.) Despite the cost, the field trips were popular. In 2004, they attracted a total audience of 7,000 students and teachers, and although Androzzo needed to sell 175 tickets to a show in order for it to run, she had only had to cancel two of the thirty planned (OTSFM 2004b; ibid.)

Ultimately, as Yolanda described them, these outreach programs came down yet again to the Old Town School’s mission to counter negative messages in conventional music education.
Yolanda herself suffered from the early discouragement so many of the OTSFМ staff, students and teachers seemed to have experienced. Growing up, she loved to sing, “and I remember singing the * loudest* in the class, ‘cause it just felt so good, like in fifth grade. And the teacher would always have to tell me, ‘Could you just be a little *quieter*?’ That was the beginning of the downfall of my musical esteem abilities.” Joining the choir her freshman year in high school completed it.

I had a hard time as an alto standing next to the sopranos and keeping my alto part. And it was a couple days before the final recital. So the choir director pulled me down, he says “C’mere Yo, Yolanda, c’merc.” “Yeah?” Thinking he’s gonna tell me what a great job I’m doing. He says, “You know, you’re still off-key. And the recital’s tomorrow. Could you just lip-synch the words?”[…] And I was like [hyperventilating sound]. And I never sang again. I never picked up an instrument, I never sang. (Y. Androzzo interview 2005)

Much later, through her performances of her own poetry as an adult, she found the courage to sing in public again, and was amazed that others liked her voice.

But I started realizing as an educator, in working with kids, and you see these barriers that they come across. And you know that there’s been somebody in their life that’s told them that they aren’t good enough. And you don’t want to be one of those people. I don’t want to be my music choir director, to ruin an experience for them. I want them to *grow*, and become *more* of who they are, through the arts[….] It’s *such* a privilege. And it’s such important work. And you’re *changing people’s lives*[….] I really appreciate having this job for a number of different reasons, but the *main* one, the one I enjoy the most, is watching the kids, and just witnessing the power of music and dance and theatre to transform them and to enlighten them. (*ibid.*)

**Resources**

The Old Town School offered a couple of other significant services not easily classified with either education programs or performances. Each was coordinated by a single, part-time staff member and provided important support to the mission of the Old Town School.
The Resource Center. The Resource Center is a library and archive housing a collection of over 20,000 recordings, books, scores, and magazines, along with the audiovisual equipment necessary to listen to or view the materials on site. The Resource Center was open to the general public, though only faculty and staff could check the materials out. Colby Maddox has run the Resource Center since 1999, transforming it from little more than a pile of boxes to a spacious, comfortable and well-equipped space in the basement of the Lincoln Square building. He accomplished this with the aid of a team of volunteers and the occasional intern, working shifts throughout the week assisting patrons, entering materials into the database, and logging and digitizing an ever-growing collection of concert recordings. The Resource Center’s primary users were teachers looking for material or recordings, and students interested in digging deeper into their musical interests.

The Wiggleworms teachers—a couple of them use it often. People who teach private lessons and need to get charts use it often. High school students doing reports on music—that happens often. Students of specific instruments looking for instructional books. That gets messed up quite a bit, people are just grabbing and pulling them. It’s OK, I don’t expect them to put it back in the right place. (Maddox interview 2005b)

Originally called the “Resource Center Museum,” it first took shape after the renovation of the Armitage building in 1988, with funding from the Scholl Foundation. Jim Hirsch hired Paul Tyler, then a Ph.D. candidate in folklore/ethnomusicology at Indiana University, as its first caretaker. Hirsch had envisioned it as a museum with the intention of creating a better showcase for the existing collection of thirty antique banjos (acquired sometime in the 1960s) and building from that base; as the name suggests, he also imagined it as a collection of concert videos and other materials to serve as an educational resource for students.

I immediately said, “There’s two separate things here. One is to tell the story of the banjos. That’s the museum. The other is the Resource Center.” And he recognized, yeah, it was two separate things. So my job was both. I was really
interested in the banjo side of it—I wanted to educate, I wanted to do exhibits. But the Resource Center was what Jim was really—the banjos were just here, we had to do something that was fundable. It could be sexy enough. (P. Tyler interview 2005)

It was originally located on the second floor in “this little sliver of a closet. That was the resource center. No windows.”

The first day I was shown this room, and here was this pile of videotapes, barely labeled. And this cassette tapes. Then I went down and rooted around in the basement, and found various LPs. Whatever I found, I just brought up there, and I started...I went and studied, borrowed some books from the library on cataloging. I’d never had any library science courses, but you know, I just went and read up what, and came up with a really rough, but...I tried to be as rigorous as I could about it, a way of describing every little piece of thing that we got, working from what it was. (ibid.)

Tyler had a small budget for acquisitions and would “scour used record shops[....] I wrote up a mission statement—a collection policy, the scope of what we were going to do[....] And I wrote it up in such a way that if it was viewed as folk-based, we would take it. We weren’t gonna do, you know, classical or pop. Or even jazz was beyond our scope.” Over five years, Tyler grew the collection from a couple hundred items to six or seven thousand. The Center did not seem to be well used, however. “I fielded a lot of questions on the phone, but I almost never had a visitor” (ibid.).

Some of Tyler’s museum projects were described in the last chapter; by 1992, however, disagreements with Hirsch over exhibit style and quality led him to quit, and the museum project did not continue. Tyler stayed on as a teacher and Bob Medich, who was in charge of marketing, took on the Resource Center as one of his responsibilities. “He transferred all the catalog information that I had from PC to Mac. Then Bob got that stuff done, and it was pretty inactive[....] It took Colby to actually say, “Ok, let’s do it.” And get himself a job in the process” (P. Tyler interview 2005).
After essentially lying fallow for about six years, the Resource Center had a new coordinator in Colby Maddox, who had recently started teaching mandolin at the School. Maddox had moved to Chicago in the mid-1990s from Ann Arbor, Michigan, to join the Chicago-based touring bluegrass group Special Consensus, led by Greg Cahill, a banjo player long associated with the Old Town School. He had studied mandolin and fiddle since childhood and had grown up in California surrounded by music—“living room bluegrass and folk music[...]. My dad is one of the best music fans I know—he owns records all over the map. We were big fans of the Who, and Jimmy Hendrix. He was not very narrow-minded. He always liked bluegrass.” Colby graduated from Oberlin College, taking advantage of its well-known conservatory to expand his musical knowledge. “I took a lot of classes at the Con—African American, Indian, general world music.” He focused especially on jazz, however, taking academic classes as well as an improv practicum on the mandolin. “I narrowed it down to bluegrass after I did the whole jazz thing through college. I was like, I’m going to go back to where the mandolin has a role. I really like this stuff, keeping a closer focus on bluegrass.” He never set out to become a professional musician; “I aimed at being good, always wanted to get better. It was just the desire to get better” (Maddox interview 2005b).

Maddox was not a scholar in the way that Tyler was.

I was an English major—I knew how to write and read. I was highly interested in resource center work because I was a teacher, I’d already been through trying to cobble together what I had from my own collection to put together teaching materials. It was frustrating and I felt isolated and like I wasn’t going to succeed. But I was heartened by the wealth of stuff that was in the Resource Center, started using it right away. I had a vested interest in having it work, which was what recommended me for the job. They would not have been able to find an MLS to touch that job, unless they found a librarian who’s also a folk musician. (Maddox interview 2005b)
Like Paul Tyler, Maddox was presented with something of a mess, once again in a new space, when he started work in 1999.

[I] inherited a bunch of semi-packed boxes in the storage area in the basement of our new building. And it was going to be called the Resource Center. All the signs in the building said “Resource Center in basement”—they had all the signs made. Didn’t bother to make the Resource Center very hospitable, but I think it was a situation that was waiting for someone to...you know, it was the closet filled with horse shit, and someone had to come along and say, “There’s a pony in there somewhere!” [laughs] (Maddox interview 2005a)

Volunteer Alison Hinderliter, also an Oberlin graduate and an archivist at the Newberry Library, helped Maddox design a database and cataloguing method tailored to the collection’s purpose. Together they came up with a collection of genre categories, governed by practical functionality rather than an academically driven taxonomy. The largest category is “North American Roots,” further broken down into genres like “Country,” “Old Time,” “Rhythm and Blues,” and “Rock and Roll.” “Folk” is a separate category, subdivided into “Traditional” (field recordings and pre-1960 revivalists) and “Contemporary” (post-1960, including singer-songwriters). The only type of music that Maddox categorically rejected for the collection was Western art music; he also did not keep any hip-hop or house music, though he has said he would be open to it if someone with expertise put energy into building a collection.

Yeah, there is a kind of crossover between those categories. It’s never a neat, easy way to do business to do things by genre, but it’s much superior to the way Paul did it. Paul put everything in order of appearance and creating this “accession number” and people would go, “My stuff’s over here, and it’s over here, and over here.” And nobody could take ownership for it. I understand why he did it—he’s an academic and couldn’t face the gray areas. I don’t have any problem with it [laughs]. (Maddox interview 2005b)

The organization is not always logically consistent, but seems to have worked for users; according to Maddox, it has been “very effective. People know where to go for their stuff.
Teachers go right to the right area. People who use it regularly know about it. People who go in to grab stuff right before class never know what’s going on” (ibid.).

It was just after this system had been established that I began volunteering for Colby in 2000. Like other volunteers, I worked one three-hour shift per week, which at that time involved more data entry than patron assistance. Over the next decade, in which I intermittently returned to volunteer and/or conduct research (and Colby and I became good friends), the Resource Center doubled its space, the CD collection grew from a few hundred to nearly 2000 and the sizable LP collection Tyler had developed grew by about a third. The Center also offered instructional books, scholarly books about music, and children’s books, as well as a growing video collection. Originally jumbled randomly in storage boxes, the archival materials documenting OTSFM history, including documents, photographs and videotapes, have been gradually organized, and Maddox has been steadily digitizing all the audiovisual materials. In later years, the Center has seen a steady stream of patrons throughout the day, but Maddox continued to strive for improvement. “I’m never satisfied with the usage. It could be utilized more, more people could take more interest in it” (Maddox interview 2005b).

Musician referrals. Though not much was done to draw attention to it at the time of my research, the Old Town School has long offered a booking service. People in the Chicago region interesting in hiring a musician or dancer to perform at a party, wedding, or other event could call up the Music Referrals Coordinator—since 2001, Jenna Murfin—who determined which Old Town School faculty or staff member would best suit their needs, connected the client and the artist, drew up a contract, and collected the payment. For clients, the Old Town School provided a convenient concentration of eclectic, traditional talent; for the artists, the School helped them patch together a living as performers. For each booking, the artist received 80% of the fee and
the School took a 20% cut, comparable to rates charged by other booking agents in the Chicago area (Murfin interview 2008). The service was listed on the home page of the Old Town School’s website and in the catalog, but no additional marketing energies were expended to promote it. Generally, people heard of it by word of mouth.

Murfin spent more than half of her work time on referrals (the rest was spent as a front desk manager). She occupied a central yet unobtrusive position as a necessary point-person for many of the performer-teachers, a liaison between them and a broader Chicago clientele, as well as a front desk employee greeting students, audiences, and visitors. This, combined with her quiet, open and observant nature gave her a uniquely holistic perspective on the life of the School, some of which she has shared with me over the years, though not all of it “on the record.” Jenna was my roommate during the year of my fieldwork and has become a close friend.

A “farmer’s daughter from the Midwest,” Jenna came to Chicago from downstate Illinois in the mid-1990s to attend college at DePaul University. She majored in English—“because I wanted to read books I hadn’t read”—explored art history and philosophy, and generally had a great time. She also discovered Bob Dylan. Raised on a steady diet of Top 40 pop hits, with little else available in her rural environment, college gradually exposed her to music outside of that mainstream, starting with the Chicago indie rock scene. Dylan was a revelation: the first time she saw him perform live, she went back the next day and the day after. She felt a profound connection with his wordcraft: “literature informed my love of his music” (Murfin interview 2008). Learning about Dylan, the Beat poets, and the period in American history when they emerged led her to an awareness of “folk” and traditional music. She had been aware of the Old Town School existence all along—it’s Armitage location is in the same neighborhood as
DePaul—but not until after graduation, when a job opening caught her eye, did she make it through the door, attracted by the possibility of work more suited to her interests.

Conclusion

Since the time of my research, a number of staff and faculty have left the School and new people have been hired, inevitably. Most notably, David Roche left the position of executive director in 2006 in order to take a position in the Chicago Public Schools to direct a new Office of Arts Education there. Victim of a wave of lay-offs in the spring of 2010, he has since taken on the executive directorship of San Francisco’s Blue Bear School of Music. After a year-long search, James Bau Graves, an experienced community arts organizer from Maine, again with training in ethnomusicology, took the helm of the Old Town School late in 2007, just in time for the School’s fiftieth anniversary celebration. Juan Dies, Delano Androzzo and Yolanda Androzzo have also moved on, and the approach to diversity building has been reconfigured under Graves. Remarkably, almost all of the other administrators and teachers mentioned in this chapter still work at the Old Town School.

As important as the individuals and their personal histories are to the constitution of the organization, at this point in its existence, the Old Town School has a sustainability independent of the influence of any one individual, or even a faction of individuals. For those working inside it, day to day, this is not always easy—or necessary—to perceive.

But that’s not something that is in the front lobe of a lot of people, thinking about an organization. How is the whole organism operating? It’s like, “That person…sucks.” Or “That person is making my job miserable,” you know? It’s all these interpersonal things that are, you know, the trees instead of the forest. So I’m trying to see the forest for the trees and do some replanting and trying to make the forest function. So that’s a little different model, I think. And more and more people are getting that[.....] So it’s playing with all of those ingredients
to see how the organism thrives or not. That’s what I’m doing. (Roche interview 2005a)

The School’s particular ethos of egalitarianism and freedom makes an overtly imposed organizational structure inappropriate, though both are essential to its stability.

It’s about an ambience that has to do not with superiority, but more of a shared experience. That’s what creates community. To institutionalize that is hard. Because the institution has to be competently run, or it falls apart. And yet it sort of has to be invisible. The clear structures, the clarity of the structures, have to be so crystalline that it kind of drops away, people don’t even notice it. It’s when there’s some confrontation it becomes ugly. That it begins to rub. But most of the time it’s Mark Dvorak sitting in the front lobby on Tuesdays when he come in and just talking to whoever comes in, and playing some banjo, like that. And things that form around that. I find that to be community building. (Roche interview 2005a)

Despite their distinctly different personalities, leadership choices and styles of expression, Roche and Jim Hirsch understood the balance between rationalized structure and organic social experience quite similarly.

Interestingly, Skip Landt, recently retired from many years as a high-level administrator at City College of Chicago—a place he felt exemplified “all the bad things of corporations,” while OTSFM experiences have “always been examples of good things”—also chose a tree metaphor to reflect on the distinction between an institutional structure and the life it supports. “How do you measure an organization that is really alive? It’s like the way you measure a tree that’s alive. Are there new branches going out? Is it different one year than it was the last? It’s all those good things, and always has been” (Landt interview 2005). The Old Town School’s vitality, by that measure, is not in question.
CHAPTER 7
LEARNING BY DOING:
THE GUITAR PROGRAM AND THE “SECOND HALF”

Introduction

“Faciendo ediscere facere, which means ‘By doing, you learn to do,’” was the motto Bess Lomax Hawes’ mother assigned her as a child, and Hawes threads it throughout her engaging memoir: by transcribing prison songs as a child, she learned to transcribe; by performing, she became a performer; by teaching university folklore courses, she learned to teach; and so on (Hawes 2008). This principle is at the heart of the Old Town School; it is surely one of the essential resonances she and Frank Hamilton shared, and that he in turn shared with the folk music community he found in Chicago. The Old Town School approach to teaching and learning is all about doing, in a society that tends to view music as something to be consumed. As Mark Dvorak observed over his years of teaching:

And so I think our typical students, they come in and they say, “Oh, I love Tom Petty. I love Neil Young.” I love this, I love that. And I think those are good things to love. At some point, you have to say, “What am I hearing?” And a music class can prepare them to respond to what they hear. Here’s another example, as for a time I was asking my classes, “What is rhythm? What is melody? What is harmony?” Which are kind of rhetorical questions. But just to get people thinking about these things. And I said, “Name me a melody that you like. Or a tune.” And people’ll go, “Cat Stevens.” And then someone says, “Oh, I like James Taylor.” Well, they name people, they don’t name “O Susanna.”

And so this to me demonstrated this idea that we’re filled with the music we’ve consumed as listeners only. When you think about it. And to learn an instrument, really, is to say, “I’m crossing the line now. I’m going to be a participant. And learn the skills of participation so then I can enter the realm of creation.” (Dvorak interview 2005)

Although the curriculum is loose and leaves a lot of room for personal choice, the core priorities set by Hamilton and Stracke in the 1950s still held in 2005: that music education
should be accessible, social, egalitarian, orally based, contextualized, and most of all, fun—“And if you forget that, you’ve forgotten something essential” (Dvorak interview 2005). A non-competitive atmosphere supports these priorities.

There’s plenty of personal competition, like, “Oh God, I didn’t practice this weekend, I’m gonna sound crappy.” But there’s so little of that exterior pressure, which I think is so detrimental to good musical spirit. So I think that that’s what’s key about this place. And people find that element, and understand they need that. Then the music can really sing. Because it’s become very expressive. At whatever level, nobody’s going to laugh at whatever level it is. You just do at your level, and if you’re going to be in Guitar 1 for next five years, so be it! That’s your program. (Roche interview 2005b)

Together, these elements are put into practice in an Old Town School “way,” or approach. “I think there’s an attitude that everybody is a musician[…] No matter what level they’re at[…] Everybody has some sort of music in them. [pause] And that the approach brings that out, and shares that, as a communal thing.” (Tomasello interview 2005b).

This chapter will discuss the “bread and butter” of the curriculum, the Guitar Program, together that venerable Old Town School tradition, the Second Half. The largest instructional department at the School, there were 184 guitar classes being offered each week in the spring of 2005 by roughly 60 teachers, Guitar Program Manager Jimmy Tomasello estimated; if each class had somewhere between five and fifteen students, then approximately 1,000 students were studying guitar there during that completely ordinary session. The Guitar Program, therefore, seems the appropriate territory to look for the “typical” student and the “typical” teacher—if such creatures can be said to exist—and to explore how the Old Town School approach to learning manifested in practice at that time. “It is the mainstay of how people get introduced to the School” (Brickey interview 2005a). Second Half, a multi-level mass jam session, took place
at 9:30 every evening after class.\textsuperscript{1} During the last week of each session, Second Half would become a graduation show, when classes—guitar or otherwise—gathered to perform for each other, bringing the student community together across interests in a way few other events could. Historically based in the Guitar Program, controversy has bubbled up from time to time over issues of the Second Half’s inclusivity (or lack thereof) to other instruments; one such debate was just subsiding as I did my fieldwork.

As a pianist with no real knack for stringed instruments, I was well suited to starting the guitar curriculum near the bottom. I had been playing guitar off and on for a couple of years, but had not worked very hard at it. In November and December of 2004, I took Guitar 2 Skills with Cathy Norden, followed by Guitar 2 Repertoire with Tomasello in March and April of 2005; instead of proceeding with the guitar sequence, I then turned my attention to ensemble classes. I attended Second Half during those two sessions, of course, but also frequented it at other times throughout the year, making a point of visiting on different days of the week and times of day to witness different combinations of classes, instruments, and teachers. I will focus here on the core guitar classes—levels 1 through 4—and touch on course offerings at other levels and on other instruments as comparable or contrasting examples. I will only be dealing with adult group classes, however, as most representative of the Old Town School approach.\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1} Morning and midday classes were being offered on Mondays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, and were also followed by their own, mini-Second Halves.  
\textsuperscript{2} Except as briefly described in Chapter 6, children’s classes and private lessons are beyond the purview of my research.
Students

Walks of Life

We went around the room introducing ourselves. It’s roughly even between men and women. An older group, though; there are no more than a couple people younger than me, if that, and everyone’s a working adult (though the red-headed woman did say she was only “quasi-employed”). In fact, the theme as we went around was being tired at the end of a long day, started by the first woman, a big-built blonde woman who teaches first grade, and today was one of those bad days, I guess, but she was happy to be here. Another young man (the only one I’m guessing to be definitely in his twenties) teaches middle school in the western suburbs. There’s a blonde woman who’s a sergeant in the Chicago Police. And a couple of parents with teenage sons who play guitar better than they do and they’re trying to keep up. Maybe more than a couple—parenting was definitely another theme. (Fieldnotes for March 1, 2005; first day of Guitar 2 Repertoire)

Adult students at the Old Town School were predominantly white and middle class, not as racially or economically diverse as the School’s ideals would demand, but significantly diverse in age, gender and other, less quantifiable qualities; demographic statistics on the Guitar Program specifically do not appear to have been tracked by OTSF. As individuals, their motivations, goals and learning styles ranged widely, but not infinitely; I have attempted elicit a set of loose categories of these based on my observations and interviews (in which the interviewees also shared such observations). This is not to be taken as a statistically valid survey, however. Most teachers and students did not take as keen an interest in student demographics as the administrative staff and related to each other primarily on an individual level. Teachers anywhere will, of course, begin to see patterns among their students, but although my standard interviews included a request to describe a “typical student,” they by and large avoided doing this. “You have to see them as individuals and just assess what they’re going to be able to do and what they might be interested in doing and what might motivate them,” mandolin and guitar teacher Colby Maddox explained (Maddox interview 2005a).
Because students brought such a wide range of personal experiences to the classroom, teachers needed to be sensitive to reading those differences.

In age, adult students ran the gamut from high school to retirement age, though I was told that the guitar classes tended to skew younger (this was not necessarily the case in the classes I took). Length of experience at the School varied as well; a few had been coming to the Old Town School for decades, in one capacity or another, but given the institution’s massive growth over the previous decade, the vast majority were much more recent arrivals. Turnover was also high, since the Old Town School encouraged experimentation. Skip Landt, the senior harmonica teacher, found that more than half of his students in recent classes had been “brand new” to the School. Jimmy Tomasello felt that these newer students, viewed through a lens of class politics, were more mainstream than past students.

I have to say that I felt more diversity ten or twelve years ago. Before we got really big[…. Y]ou just really felt that there were a lot of hand-to-mouth artists coming here, and that type of person, in addition to people who have money and time on their hands[….] It is more of a disciplined, kind of a quieter crowd of people coming in through here these days. You know, occasionally you get some loud classes, or loud people in classes. You know, just more restrained. I think the level of Republicans and Democrats, as liberals and conservatives, has equaled out, where, you know, this place used to be Commie central. (Tomasello interview 2005a)

Gail Tyler’s internal research found that guitar students were 60% male (G. Tyler interview 2005). Men seemed to be more prevalent in the upper-level guitar classes, however, while the genders were more balanced in the beginning levels; Tomasello’s personal impression was that they were even beginning to skew female. “I have felt that there’s more women. I know me personally, I’ve been making an effort to teach more girl’s songs, female songs” (Tomasello interview 2005a). Bill Brickey expanded on the kind of musical sensitivity he’d needed to develop as a male guitar teacher:
Initially, before there were so many women teaching guitar here, the reason you had to do that, on a very basic level—forget the fact that they’re women, just look at them as people who tend to sing in a certain key—oh my God! I’m teaching songs that are in guy keys! Every once in a while, I had to do a song […] in a girl’s key, because that’s so important to your learning, that it be something that you can attach yourself to, that you can relate to, and that it’s not impossible. (Brickey interview 2005a)

He had also encountered the need for political sensitivity on occasion, as when a female student was uncomfortable singing a Led Zeppelin song with lyrics she considered sexist and objectifying of women; Brickey acknowledged her perspective and switched to another song (ibid.)

Among the Old Town School departments, the Guitar Program appeared to be particularly unsuccessful at attracting racial diversity. A bilingual Spanish-English beginning guitar class, which emphasized guitar music of Latin America and Spain, had recently been added to the curriculum and did successfully attract Latino students, but certainly did not integrate them. There appeared to have been very few African American students, and there was only one African American guitar teacher—ever, as far as I am aware (Brickey). Dance and voice classes, on the other hand, were known for attracting a much more ethnically diverse student body. Elaine Moore, who taught both core guitar classes and vocal classes noticed a consistent difference in the makeup of her classes. Because I have so many more people in the voice classes who are from other countries, who have English as a second language or third or fourth or who knows how many, who’ve come here from all over the world. Really. In voice. Occasionally in guitar. But guitar skews much more toward majority. I always notice, there might be in a class of twenty people, one person ethnically from India let’s say, maybe an Asian person here or there, maybe one black person…white, the rest. Pretty yuppie, white. Whereas in voice, I’ll have sometimes the majority, or more than half be clearly from somewhere else, of non-Northern European descent[…] And I really don’t know why that is. The guitar appeals to a certain segment, at least the way we teach it. (E. Moore interview 2005b)
I was surprised by how few of the white students I interviewed even noticed the relative lack of ethnic and racial diversity at the Old Town School; most not only did not remark on it, but also did not choose to categorize themselves as “white,” or mentioned it but dismissed it as insignificant when I asked them my standard question: “How do you identify yourself, in terms of ethnicity, race, religion, class, etc.—whichever categories are meaningful to you?” Race, in many cases, was not a meaningful category in relation to themselves unless they did, in fact, belong to a racial minority, or unless I specifically asked them about their ethnic descent. A typical and relatively articulate response to the question was Cindy Rotondo’s:

Really none, to tell you the truth. I mean, obviously I’m Caucasian, so that’s not a big one, I’m a lapsed Catholic but very non-religious. None of [the categories] really are [big]. If anything, I always look at culture as something that provides opportunities to learn more about things instead of being divisive in any way. (Rotondo interview 2005)

A few students did notice the overall whiteness of the school, including Rotondo, Jerri Wagner (see Chapter 8) and Bjorn Krane, but it was not a situation they felt able to practically address in any way.

It’s not a lack of effort from the School trying to be diversified, but admittedly, it’s predominately a white...the population of people who are attending the program I’m guessing all come from the North Side of Chicago and are all white. And I don’t know what else they could do to reach out to get more people here. [...] I don’t have any creative solutions, so I try not to be too critical. But it is an observation. (Krane interview 2005)

No one, however, would describe the School atmosphere as intolerant; quite the opposite. Brickey, someone who is well attuned to issues of institutional racism, was adamant about the open-minded attitudes in face-to-face interactions.

We joke about it all the time, but one of the things that you tell people when you’re thinking about whether or not to come, especially the ladies, we say, “Well, you know, it’s a very safe way to meet men” [...] Safe to meet people. Because it’s an open environment. Because we never have had a problem with any homophobia here, we’ve never had any problems with any racism here, it just
has never been that way. The kind of people that we brought to the table were always looking for this environment. This is the environment that they want to be in. And people that didn’t want to be in it were offended by it the moment they walked in the door. (Brickey interview 2005a)

_The decision to come (back) to OTSF_. Why do people decide to sign up for a guitar class? What motivates them to learn to play an instrument as an adult? Once they have made that decision, why choose the Old Town School? And what (if anything) brings them back? It is often not a trivial decision, even though it is a “third place,” leisure activity.

The aspects of a typical student, I would say this, is for some reason, music is very important to them. Because by the time they sit down in Guitar 1, they’ve made several decisions that say, “music is very important to me.” They’ve given a night of the week. Class is $150 or something, whatever it is—which, for a lot of people that’s not a lot of money for a weekly night out. But on the other hand, then you get the guitar, which if you don’t have one, there’s hundreds of dollars involved here and some speculation that you’re going to give some time over this. And so there’s a level of commitment present. (Dvorak interview 2005)

The range reasons are nearly infinite, as distinctive as the individuals themselves; my interviews provided a sampling of motivations.

The most basic reason to take a class, and possibly the most common, is because it’s fun. All the students that I spoke with had long had an interest in music, whether playing, singing, or just listening, and believed that at least some kind of music they liked could be pursued at the Old Town School. Cindy Rotondo was in my Guitar 2 Rep class and had been taking guitar classes, including a fingerboard theory class, for four years. She had progressed to Guitar 3, but dropped back down to Guitar 2 because she was not yet comfortable playing bar chords. She was fifty years old when we talked, single, and worked as a college recruiter for a consulting firm, a job that she said kept her oriented toward young people.

I’ve always wanted to learn to play. I’ve always had this fascination... It’s funny, over the last few years, I’ve really started trying to identify where this came from. I’ve always had this interest with singer-songwriters. From albums I’ve had, short of the Beatles, a lot of them have been more of the James Taylor, Carly Simon –
those kinds of people. I always seem to gravitate towards the more acoustic music, so thought it’d be kind of fun to figure out how to play[....] This is going to be just the hobby to keep me off the streets and out of the house [laughs].
(Rotondo interview 2005)

The Old Town School was the obvious choice to her, since she had known about it “forever. Literally.” She had lived in Chicago off and on for almost thirty years and had started going to Celtic shows at the Armitage building in the 1980s and 1990s (ibid.).

Alex Todd’s reasons for taking up mandolin were equally modest and straightforward—just wanting to play for fun—but his inspiration was family.

The mandolin that I have was my grandfather’s. I remember seeing it in various closets and taking it out and just kinda wanging on it, and not doing anything with it. And for some reason, when I moved into the city about two years ago, I took it[....] And it sat and sat in my place. Because I had no idea—who teaches mandolin? So, finally, I was just doing searches, trying to find a teacher for private lessons, then all of a sudden the Old Town School popped up as a Google search. I’d heard of it before, but had never been here before, never been to any concerts or anything like that. I actually had a friend who worked here, but [had] never done anything. [I was] like “Wow! They do this!” So I brought it in, got it all tuned up after forty years of neglect. (Todd interview 2005)

Todd was in my Mandolin 1 Repertoire class, and while to a certain extent his motivations were instrument-specific, they had more to do with a fascination with his grandfather, who was a Scottish-born circus trapeze artist in the early twentieth century, the first person ever to do a triple somersault on the trapeze. “If I had to choose an instrument, I probably wouldn’t choose the mandolin,” he admitted, then added: “I would now that I know how nice and beautiful it sounds.” Todd had had piano lessons as a kid, followed by school band, in which he played the tuba, but had not played any music since then; it had always been a struggle to keep up with the practicing and he lacked motivation to pursue anything further. Mandolin at the Old Town School, he found, was a completely different experience. “Remembering back to my piano, and how I dreaded practicing, and I didn’t do it. And playing the tuba, I dreaded practicing so I just
stopped doing it. With mandolin, I pick it up, no one has to yell at me to do it, we play cool songs, and I love practicing it” (Todd interview 2005).

Of course, many students come for practical reasons. Peter Moore, whom I met at the Grafton Folk Club one evening and continued to run into here and there afterwards, had been taking guitar classes for less than a year when we did our interview. Self-taught on electronic keyboards, he did not initially have any particular interest in learning the guitar, but developed a love for traditional Irish music and wanted to play with a group of his friends; he had never played with a group before.

But they kind of, they were really kind of excluding anybody that didn’t have the guitar. And the reason why I didn’t go for guitar before was because I didn’t like the idea of strings. And guitar would be very complicated and hard to learn. […]. That was probably my main reason. And it was really because I really loved music and really loved making music[…] And I thought, well, this might be a good way to do it. (P. Moore interview 2005)

He thought of the Old Town School right away. “It was always there. We were in the neighborhood. And it was immediately, a lot of guys I hung out with, they said ‘Old Town School’ […] So I knew about it since I moved to the neighborhood, which was about seven years ago.” Thirty-eight years old, Moore was born and raised in Ireland, in working class Dublin, and was orphaned at a young age. “So it wasn’t a lot of fun, though I did have a lot of fun throughout my childhood. I remember laughing quite a bit.” He did not do well at formal education and never went to college, but was quite good at teaching himself to do things and found good jobs in the electronics industry in Ireland, then tech support and development in the U.S. Because of his love for New Wave synthesizer-based music of the 1980s, he taught himself to play keyboards and to compose his own music, but the kinds of music he admired “are really kind of produced, so you couldn’t really reproduce them that well.” Although learning keyboards on his own had been in many ways frustrating, he was ambivalent about signing up
for an OTSFM guitar class. “I didn’t really think that classes—they’d kind of be very clinical and…not fun. You know? That’s how classes are to me. I was very surprised at the atmosphere, the warm atmosphere that was there. And it was so much fun. It was geared towards fun rather than, ‘Ok, this is the way to do it, and there’s no other way to do it.’” By the time of our interview, his wife had also started clogging classes there, and both his daughters were in the Wiggleworms program.

One of the most common motivations to come to the Old Town School was to meet people. It was well known as a good dating scene for single people, young and not-so-young (Cindy Rotondo met her boyfriend there). An issue of Time Out Chicago, for example, listed the Old Town School first on their list of “pickup spots” in a column called “Singles Scoop.”

Why? Because if you can’t find your soulmate—someone who also obsessively talks about near run-ins with Jeff Tweedy—in the Wilco ensemble class, he doesn’t exist[…. S]ince it’s a respectable school (not exactly the meat market we’re making it out to be), see-and-be-seen pretensions get checked at the door[….] You don’t even need a pickup line—just lean over and make eye contact when you sing, “Baby, you can drive my car.” (Nusser 2006)

But a lot of people were just looking for a new circle of friends, or simply good company.

PM: I think there’s one guy in our class who’s an alcoholic, and he just wanted to be in there to get out of—it’s probably not the best thing to do, but…[laughs]

TL: There’s a fair bit of beer over there [at OTSF].

PM: Yeah. But that was his idea, was just to get occupied. You know, so there’s lots of ways to end up in there, and it’s amazing who you meet. I think that a lot of musicians have this urge to meet people. I don’t know if that’s true or not. I think a lot of them have this need to…to connect. That’s basically what it’s all about, isn’t it? (P. Moore interview 2005)

Moore himself was also hoping for new friends, “which is maybe kind of hard in the city[….] and I’m a very gregarious person, and I like being around people. And I can’t stand not being around people.” For him, it was a cross-cultural issue as well:
I think that, the difference between Irish life and American life is very, like…Irish life seems to be more getting together, and American life seems to be more…coming apart. Which I’ve noticed. It’s really hard to keep a friendship[….] That’s something that has given me hope, the people that I’ve met so far are very interested in other people, and a lot of them actually have the same idea. *(ibid.)*

Some were looking specifically for musical connections. Bjorn Krane, a physician who had started taking classes at the Old Town School when he first moved to Chicago four years earlier for a medical residency, was already an accomplished, self-taught guitarist. He was appreciative of the networking potential at the School.

I’ve really discovered that just because it’s so well-organized here, and it’s so easy to sign up. You take a large city that has five to seven million people. You might find ten, twelve, thirty people that are into bluegrass music. But, there’s no way that I would ever know who those people are. But by having a program like this, maybe two, three people come from the northern suburbs, I come from downtown, another two people come from the south. We all meet here. I’ll never have that opportunity again[….] Overall, I guess there would be a hope that I could find someone that has some similar interests in music, and then continue play together beyond classes. *(Krane interview 2005)*

Often, a life-changing event would be the catalyst to actually start a class: a move, retirement, graduation, job loss, a break-up or divorce, a death—anything that leaves a new void in one’s life.

I broke up with my girlfriend. Basically, between work and school, and then any spare time I had was put in the relationship. And it’s pretty hard for me to say [to my girlfriend], “No, I wanna play guitar by myself instead.” [….] I might pick it up once a month or so, but it really sat in the corner. But I ended up breaking up—finishing a long-term relationship—and suddenly I had a lot of free time. *(Krane interview 2005)*

Neil Donovan, whom I knew from the Jug Band Ensemble, retired from his career as a firefighter and wanted to return to an old love, and although she had not yet retired, his wife came along.

ND: I’m one of the teeming masses that played guitar in my youth, thirty years ago I played for about ten years, then dropped out of—not *interest* in music, but just dropped out of *playing* music from the mid-seventies until three years ago.
And decided I wanted to start up with guitar again, so I started taking guitar
lessons

Ellen Shriver: Celebrating his retirement.

ND: Yes, celebrating retirement. [both laugh a little]. And enjoyed the guitar
lessons a lot. And did a lot of different things that I’d never done before.
(Donovan and Shriver interview 2005)

A less tangible but powerful draw can be the sense of fitting in, especially to those who
do not often experience the sense of “belonging” with the people around them. For Jason
McInnes, it was a revelation and altered the direction of his life.

I will never forget the first time I walked here, ‘cause I signed up over the phone.
I walked in here and was like, “This is it.” […] I walked in, and you know, it was
like one of those days here, where everyone’s just sitting outside, picking around,
everyone’s hugging each other. Like I am now, now it’s me out there doing it.
Saying, “Hey, hey, hey,” hi to all your friends. I could just tell that—I just
remember being like, “Oh my God, this is the greatest place on earth!” (McInnes
interview 2005)

Although the decision is a casual one for some, for many adults, stepping into beginner
status in music, a realm of activity where they may well have had demoralizing experiences in
their youth, and which is typically glorified as a professionals-only activity in society at large, is
rather frightening. Elaine Moore has found the anxiety levels especially acute in her vocal
classes.

EM: One doctor who’s married to a doctor says, “I have my husband prescribe
beta blockers so that I can come to this class. ‘Cause otherwise I wouldn’t be able
to come.” I’ve had many people tell me they take something before they come to
that class. It’s nothing I’m doing, I’m a very nice person! I’m just, “doo-de-doo-de-doo.” [both laugh] But it’s their own lifelong…

TL: So why do they do it?

EM: Why do they come? I don’t know. Something told them, get beyond this.
And very often […] I can’t believe how good people are. (E. Moore interview
2005b)
At the same time, for many, the weekly ritual of an Old Town School class turns out to be the ballast in their lives. “Inevitably, because you’re there with those people for eight weeks, they start talking. And you find out that, for some people, this is the way they make it through the week” (Brickey interview 2005a). In a sense, the anxiety simply points to how important making music is to the students, and how it fulfills a need completely unmet in their work lives.

I’ll tell you what. It is interesting to see how deeply people feel about music and making music themselves. When I describe the anxiety, but also just, I guess, the importance that it has to people—still. Even though most of the people I see, they’re coming straight from work, they’ve been working all day, seemingly good jobs, own houses [etc.]. And so many of them just wish that they could do some musical thing. It almost makes me feel good about having such a low income! Because they really do. They say, “You’re so lucky.” People say that to me all the time[. . .] I regret to say that I have a lot of people who come in that don’t like their job, and they use a private lesson as sort of a therapeutic thing. They are single and trying to meet somebody. They used to love to sing or play music and they haven’t done it in fifteen, twenty years. And so they think of this place as God’s gift, that anyone who works here must be one of the luckiest people in the world. (E. Moore interview 2005b)

These deeper needs are hard to articulate. “Most people can’t,” guitar teacher Mark Dvorak pointed out.

And that’s why they’re here. If you can find that out, you don’t need an Old Town School. You’ll go off and play. ‘Cause that’s the secret. And you find where your feet go down. You know, I use this word, and I don’t know if it’s the right word, it’s just over the years it’s the one that I think about, so I don’t know if it’s the right word, and that’s why I’m reticent to say it. [very softly] But I look for pain. (Dvorak interview 2005)

But in order to find the expressive outlet for these needs, students must acquire a certain level of both skill and confidence, for which they come to the Old Town School.

But you see people who are shy. And you see people often whose heads are filled with things—which is not really anything—but it’s like, they have an idea in their head, and they can’t keep time. A certain kind of music teacher’ll say, “Well, he can’t keep time.” And I know differently than that. It’s, “Well he doesn’t know how to listen.” He’s following what he thinks he should[. . .] And so that’s what I look for. Is, if somebody’s shy, you have to decide, is it time to leave ‘em alone, or is it time to figure out what it is they can do? That’s why that ensemble class is
good. You can meet somebody socially and say, “what do you like to play?” and then in class say, “You know, you were playing that the other day. And that sounded so good.” And then that person, you just see them go, [as if in relief] “Oh!” You know, it’s an affirmation! And I think that’s an important thing in teaching, to find out where a student is and try to affirm them in their own terms. That’s what I look for. (ibid.)

Types of learners. By virtue of its accessibility and its flexible teaching and learning practices, the Old Town School attracted many different kinds of adult learners whose approaches and experiences ranged widely, even within one small class. But they shared in common the distinction of being adult learners, and the emphasis the OTSFM placed on adult learning was unusual for a music school.

Well, there’s a funny thing that adults have where they think music is something you learn and then you can do it. Kids don’t necessarily have that—they’re sort of in it for the ride. But something that I’ve gotten myself and try to share with the students is, you just have to be in it for the ride. It’s the process. You’re never done. You can’t learn it in a year. And it’s always going to be frustrating. There’s always going to be something you could do better. That it should just be something you do, to do it. (E. Moore interview 2005b)

This focus on teaching adults was a major attraction of the Old Town School to many students, like Polly Parnell, for whom it became the center of her social life.

I like this because you know, when you come from a small town, everybody taking lessons are little kids, so adult lessons are so refreshing, and actually finding people my own age interested in the same things I’m interested in is very good. And actually, finding young people that are interested in the same things I’m interested in—even better! (Parnell interview 2005)

Attention to the specific pedagogical needs of adults was attractive as well.

And just the philosophy, the way that they teach. There’s a lot of people now have got the fact that adult learners learn things differently than children. But having adults teach the classes here and mostly having the people in the same age ranges really did mean that I was able to learn with my peers and understand things the same way. (Rotondo interview 2005)

One of the things OTSFM teachers and students alike must struggle with is the baggage that adults—particularly well-educated adults—accumulate over many years of formal education.
about how learning is accomplished in general, and how they as specific individuals do or do not learn. In fact, the Old Town School could be a space for certain kinds of learners who often were not successful in more formal approaches to music education, as well as those who might have been successful in those environments but disliked them; occasionally, even the happy product of formal music training could find a second home here.

A large class of potential music learners welcome at OTSFM but often neglected in formal music training was that of the merely average, people whose love of music was not diminished by the fact that they showed no extraordinary musical aptitude. They could learn, but simply did not stand out from the pack, in either speed or ability. Jenna Murfin had no difficulty approaching music intellectually as an avid listener and volunteer radio DJ, but struggled to translate that love into her own musical expression; she did not quite have a knack for it.

I’ve never particularly good ear for music. And I never got particularly involved in studying it too much because I felt like the intellectual side of it, while I could understand what, for instance, chord progression might sound good in a song, I didn’t necessarily feel that when I was playing it myself. I could feel something when other people would be playing music, and I could tell that they were able do it without measuring it down to every chord and strum, how it was all going to turn out. And so, I think that being involved at the Old Town School in all these different classes helped me to see the different ways people approach music, and to realize that I could, in fact, study banjo, which is an instrument you learn by ear at the Old Town School, and that I could enjoy it. Without having to make every strum perfect, or every pluck perfect. So I would say that’s probably been the biggest lesson. (Murfin interview 2008)

Guitar and mandolin teacher Colby Maddox, always a very quick study himself, has learned to appreciate not only these students, but those who are slower than average as well.

I get people who are persistent, and will show up to class, will come to class after class. You can tell that it’s kind of difficult for them to learn. But I’ve learned to not judge it based on that[….] I think I’ve learned that just because somebody’s not able to do something at pace with the rest of us doesn’t mean they’re not getting anything out of the experience, and I think there’s a certain personality type that can come every week and just hang with it. And absorb, and not get sullen or depressed. [laughs] That’s a valuable student. That’s somebody who’s
really—proof that you’re doing things the right way as a teacher, because you’re making it attractive to even someone who can’t turn around and automatically spit it back. (Maddox interview 2005a)

Also common among Old Town School students were the self-taught. Of course people interested in vernacular music of one kind or another very typically teach themselves or learn from friends, since formal education is seldom available—teenage boys and their guitars being the paradigmatic example in the late twentieth-century. When those boys grow up, some of them end up at the Old Town School. Many of the School’s teachers, in fact, were largely self-taught, with tutelage of various kinds entering into their educations only intermittently—Jim Hirsch, Michael Miles, Mark Dvorak, and Steve Levitt, for example. Students who teach themselves the basics on the guitar and were already comfortable playing on their own, like Bjorn Krane or Bryan Yanaga (see Chapter 8) often started at Guitar 4 or with some of the guitar specialty classes before moving into various ensembles or trying a new instrument, seeking out new challenges. “I bought some instruction booklets, to get the basics. Then a lot of it is just, you find a band or some songs you enjoy, and you sit down, and a couple of hours later you figure it out. Some of the guitar licks, or the melody. And nowadays with the Internet, […] I mean, it’s just so much easier” (Krane interview 2005). For these students, music is not something they associate with formal education particularly, and part of the novelty of OTSF M may be in the notion of taking a class at all.

I have not [taken classes elsewhere]. The only other class I took when I first started playing guitar, I took some lessons, and really didn’t find it that helpful. I guess I sort of felt, up until this school, I kind of felt that music is something you learn and experiment with, not something that should be taught to you. (ibid.)

Some students are self-taught at one instrument, but come to the Old Town School to learn another. Pete Moore spent years teaching himself keyboards.
I’d sit there for hours at the keyboard[...] I’m not sure how to describe it, but it, like, satisfied you, to play something[...] I used to have these big urges to just create something. And that fulfilled ‘em[...] It was really mainly for myself[...] Keyboard was really like an ad lib thing. It was an ad hoc thing. I never really had a method, didn’t even go through the chords. I knew where the notes were, I knew majors. But minors I didn’t know and sevenths I hadn’t got a clue about. And I really...had no structure[...] I had no idea what I was doing. (P. Moore interview 2005)

In retrospect, perhaps in light of his recent Old Town School experience, Peter did not seem particularly happy with his keyboard days. When he starting thinking about taking up guitar, taking a class was not the first option that sprang to mind. “I’m very good at learning stuff on my own. But I thought that I should do class and not do things that are wrong. Which I’m glad I did” (ibid.). Indeed, he did discover some advantages to a somewhat more structured approach.

I’ve always had—playing keyboard, I’m always like, “Am I doing this right?” You know, ’cause if I’m not, I’m going to pay for it later on. Here I have a comfort [of] doing something that they know is right. It’s right because I’ve been told it’s right! [laughs] So that’s a big difference with that. As well as that, it’s good to have somebody else to hit off of. The keyboard is just a solo thing. Guitar’s a real community thing. (ibid.)

At the other end of the spectrum were what David Roche referred to as the “conservatory refugees.” These are students who did have formal training in Western art music and were usually music majors in college at one point, but became disillusioned and demoralized by the experience somehow and discovered the Old Town School as a foil to and a balm for that experience—and in fact, a significant number of the administrative staff seemed to belong to this category.

You know, coming from a conservatory—I went to DePaul—talk about a pressure cooker. I could talk for hours and hours. I don’t know what your experience was like, but mine sucked. I’m a good oboe player. I can hold my own with the best of them. Music school—formal music training—makes you feel like you can’t play. There’s an entire generation of us who are brought up in that academic music school world. Our impressions of music school are of the crazy band director yelling at you because you missed a stupid note, and not about “what is the emotional core of this music, and are you really thinking about….” Most
music education now doesn’t involve any aspect of creativity, it’s all entirely a 
skills-based thing[... After college] I didn’t play for a couple years cause I was 
so traumatized by it. It’s a common story. (Rasmussen interview 2005)

Amy Rasmussen has made a career out of music, but her path was as much a reaction to her 
college education as a result of it; she is currently executive director of a non-profit organization 
promoting arts integration in the schools, and she has been an active organizer of community 
music, both at OTSFM and outside it (see Chapter 8).

Jason McInnes is another conservatory refugee who has committed to the Old Town 
School, as student, administrative staff, and now teacher.

So I’m away from home for the first time at college, freaking out. Four weeks 
later I quit trumpet. Rather than asking me what was going on, my trumpet 
teacher said, “That’s probably good. We were going to move you away from 
trumpet anyway.” That didn’t do much for my self-esteem. You know, I’d 
played guitar—I wanted to be a guitar player anyway[...:] But I had it in my head 
that that’s what you did. (McInnes interview 2005)

Jason changed his major from music to communications and eventually transferred to another 
university altogether, graduating from Columbia College in filmmaking. After a few years 
working for a small, non-profit film production company, he found the Old Town School. “I 
walked in, and was like, ‘Oh, music is about having fun. Not about stress and chairs and 
degrees...yeah, I just wanna play.” The transition can be a challenging one, however.

At first I really fought against it—resisted it. Or just couldn’t figure it out. I had a 
feeling it was right, because—only because I had done so badly at...it was more 
of a willingness to try anything, but I didn’t get it. I started with a theory class, 
which now I would never do. Fingerboard theory with Steve[...:] Like when I 
took Early Country Ensemble, and they were talking about figuring out harmony 
parts. I didn’t know what the hell that means.

TL: Because you’re used to having it in front of you.

JM: Yeah, right. Well, the idea of figuring it out...the trial and error of it, I was 
way too shy for. Now I don’t have that. (McInnes interview 2005)
The gulf between the conservatory approach and OTSFM’s could be experienced negatively as well, of course. Unknown numbers of classically trained musicians comfortable with the strict prescriptions of, for example, notated music, could find themselves at sea in the much less structured educational environment there and would not stay. Of course, it is not necessary to have a bad experience in one environment in order to have a good one in the other. Some musicians have been able to find a home at the Old Town School without the trauma of rejecting their past training.

While the de-emphasis of musical notation could be a deterrent for conservatory refugees—particularly those who are not able to make the transition—it was particularly welcoming for aural learners. It is ironic that aural learners like Sallie Gaines often seem unable to succeed in music within conventional, formal training.

SG: I took music lessons as a kid, and it was humiliating because I could never learn to read music. And learning to play a song on the piano was very painful to me. Because I had to literally translate each note like I was translating from French with a dictionary. Because I couldn’t look at a note—with the exception of middle C—I could not recognize a single note, and when you put the—what do you call it at the beginning of a sheet of music?

TL: Time signature? Key signature?

SG: The key signature, that tells you all the Bs are flat? It just meant nothing to me, and I could never understand it or figure it out. So I would play music on the piano by finally figuring out what the note was, and playing it and hearing it. Then getting the next note, like, ten minutes later. And over time playing the notes together and hearing what it sounded like and making my fingers learn where to go. And once I memorized it, I was great. But it was so painful to get there, that I just hated every minute of it.

TL: Did that discourage you from pursuing music?

SG: Oh yeah! Geez! [...] Yeah, it was very discouraging. But I’m a great audience. I love music and I’m a great listener. (Gaines interview 2005)
Sallie loved the fact that her OTSFM teachers did not emphasis reading, and once she joined Arlo’s Jug Band Ensemble, she discovered that she was, in fact, a pretty fast learner when encouraged to learn everything by ear.

Of course these learner profiles I have sketched out here hardly account for everyone at the Old Town School. Professional and pre-professional musicians studied there, too, for example, either getting their start, like Roger McGuinn or John Prine, or expanding their knowledge and career by taking up a new instrument. With no admission requirements more arduous than finding your way to the registration desk, students of almost any background could potentially show up—including those who really cannot learn to play. Although it runs counter to the fundamental Old Town School philosophy, in fact teachers did sometimes give up on students, Jimmy Tomasello admitted.

TL: Do you ever have students that you feel are kind of hopeless, musically? Or…

JT: Yeah.

TL: I mean, what do you do? What do you do with that?

JT: You tell ‘em to repeat, and you pass ‘em on to another teacher [laughs, half-joking]. You know, you might suggest private lessons. And see what they do with that. Sometimes you just have to wait it out, you know. Or just hope that…

TL: Do you or do other teachers sometimes just sort of…let them go, and then they just move on, on their own?

JT: Yeah, that’s happened as well. Yeah[....]. Every situation is different. There’s no general things here. I think people understand we’re not expected to, like, make everybody musical. You just try to bring out a level of musicality in students, in individuals. Through this thing that we, we do. But every once in a while, yeah, there’s—what can you do? (Tomasello interview 2005b)
Teachers

It is what teachers do day after day that creates and recreates the Old Town School “way,” and their personalities and musical gifts that draw the students back, month after month, year after year. Students I interviewed were generous and sincere in their appreciation of the Old Town School teaching staff.

Overall, I’ve just been so impressed with the enthusiasm and energy of the various instructors, and it seems to be that they work hard to foster a supportive, open, non-critical learning environment which is—I imagine at times, can be difficult to continue. I just don’t know how they keep the energy up, because I know some of these instructors, sometimes they teach four, five weeknights per week. (Krane interview 2005)

Although the overall quality and character of the faculty has doubtless varied over the years, as hiring priorities and practices changed, the School has consistently sustained widespread respect for the kind of teachers it attracts. Paul Tyler had already worked at the Old Town School for two years before he began teaching regularly, and was surprised when Michael Miles gave him a class: “I was actually totally cowed by the reputation of the Old Town School, thinking ‘these are really good teachers’” (P. Tyler interview 2005). OTSFM takes pride in their faculty, not only for the quality of their work, but for the unique paths they have traveled to become teachers: “Our working artists are curators of popular performance culture, trained in the school of hard knocks” (Roche, 2003 Annual Report).

Paths to teaching. Teachers traveled many different paths to reach the Old Town School, though it is somewhat more realistic generalize about them than about students. After all, they had been selectively hired—and in the case of the guitar faculty since 1999, hired by one person, Jimmy Tomasello. Although he now had to follow human resources procedures, his choices

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3 Admittedly, part of his surprise stemmed from the fact that he hadn’t applied for a teaching position and Miles only gave him a couple of days’ notice before starting.
were highly subjective and based on his experience of more than thirty years’ association with the School.

I’m strictly instinctual. Like I just felt Arlo, when he came in, I felt. When Scott Besaw walked in, I just went, Goddamn, this man is meant for this school[...] I mean, that’s not something that you expect a whole place to do. But I guess I’ve earned the right to have that…sense of intuition. Because I’ve been around long enough, and I’ve seen enough teachers from being a meek little student, or working in the store and, I just know what it takes to—you know, how does that person walk, or hold themselves or hold their pick? You just know what kind of person they are. Miles Davis said, you know someone by how they tap their foot on stage, you can tell what kind of player they are. You don’t have to listen to what they’re playing. [laughs] So, there’s that, you know? (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Teachers hired to the guitar faculty from a cold contact or an application in response to a job posting with no prior involvement with the School were in the minority. Most came with some familiarity and affection for the Old Town School in place and at least some form of personal recommendation. When Human Resources Assistant Jason McInnes would announce an open position, he didn’t find it necessary to advertise. “You know, I don’t need to do much to tell other people to tell their friends. Our teachers know it’s a good gig in here, and they like to get their friends in here too. Which we like, because if someone’s working here and they feel a friend of theirs would work well here, too, it’s the kind of place where – everyone knows who could work here” (McInnes interview 2005). Tomasello looked at other parts of the School for likely candidates or asked other teachers, who might say,

“Oh, I’ve got this student that’s ready to go. Why don’t we just give him a shot.” I sometimes look at other departments, I’ll see Wiggleworm teachers, or hear them, and go, yeah, this is good[...] I mean, how I actually started teaching group lessons here more was because Michael needed somebody. And it’s just like, you know, can you teach this class tonight? Boom[...] And a lot of people at the desk—I mean, people come through the desk, and you know that they love music. That’s why they’re here and they’re tolerating the crappy salary or whatever. And they play! [.....]
Arlo Leach was casually referred to Tomasello in this way in 2003 after taking classes off and on for five years.

I came recommended by Mark [Dvorak]. And Mark had known me and seen me teaching. And actually Mark played on one of my albums, so he’d kind of worked with me as a peer. So he knew I was at least a good player. And he gave his word to Jimmy and Jimmy took his word and that’s all it took. There wasn’t an audition or test or anything. One phone call to Jimmy, and he basically said, “So Mark says you’re pretty good.” And I said “Well, yeah, I guess.” And Jimmy said, “Do you want to do it? Here’s the hours.” (Leach interview 2005)

A significant number of teachers were originally students at the Old Town School—though, from the personal histories I have collected, most did not start as beginners and proceed straight through to becoming teachers; either they were already proficient by the time they arrived at the Old Town School, like Arlo Leach and Jason McInnes, or began their guitar study at OTSFM when young and pursued music in greater depth elsewhere or on their own before returning, like Steve Levitt, Jimmy Tomasello or Mark Dvorak. There is also an in-between category of teachers like Skip Landt, Peggy Browning, Maura Lally, Michael Mann, and Tom Ryan, who began as adult students, with or without prior guitar experience, and spent as many as ten years taking classes, then playing in ensembles, then forming their own performing groups, before being hired to teach, all while maintaining non-music careers. There were also a large number of teachers who were professional or semi-professional performing musicians before becoming teachers, and might continue to pursue their performing careers while teaching, or return to them later—for example, Frank Hamilton, Mike Dunbar, and Colby Maddox. Although musicians preceded by their reputation have sometimes been recruited by OTSFM staff (as Michael Miles used to do), this was unlikely in the Guitar Program in the 2000s; there was simply no shortage of good, available teachers.
Some had backgrounds that included formal musical training, like Elaine Moore, but nearly all were self-taught in one way or another; teachers with a predilection for teaching and learning “by the book” did not fit in well. Although some fall into teaching without prior intention to teach, suddenly or organically, others strategized for it, like Mark Dvorak, who planned a path for himself to the Old Town School (see Chapter 8). Some had backgrounds in education, especially those who also taught in the Wiggleworms department, like Sandy Lucas. All had to exhibit a talent for communication and a certain degree of charisma and, obviously, all had to be able to play—though the latter seemed to be the least of Tomasello’s concerns, at least for the core guitar curriculum.

How do you know they can play? It’s only the guitar! [TL and JT laugh] We’re only teaching guitar here! Obviously, if I’m looking for someone who’s gonna play flamenco, or teach in the flamenco class, or teach a specific style that has more technique to it, then yeah, you gotta hear ‘em play, or at least see what they’re doing. Or hear a tape. But as far as the general guitar teachers, and the people that make this such a vital place, you just…you just feel it. You figure they can play. If they can sing, that’s even better [laughs]. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Working conditions. The vast majority of teachers were part-time. In 2005 only nine of 250 teachers at the Old Town School held full-time, salaried positions; of these, seven were guitar teachers. The remaining fifty-five or so guitar teachers taught part-time, paid per class taught. Starting rates were: $25 per hour for private lessons, $30 per hour for adult group classes and $34 per hour for children’s group classes. With seniority, a teacher could be making a significantly higher rate, with raises determined at the program or departmental level (McInnes 2005b).

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4 Certain teachers were selected on the basis of length of tenure and “good standing” to join Frank Hamilton’s Faculty, a program officially launched in 2002. McInnes explained that popularity with students and willingness to take on a full teaching load were also factors in selection. “Frank’s Faculty” were to be role models and mentors for new teachers and act as liaisons between other faculty and the administration. In 2004, they were: John Abbey, Don Fulkerson, Oscar Jasso, Carol Kagy, Charles Kim, Steve Levitt, Elaine Moore, Chris Winters and Chris Walz (OTSFM 2002, 3; OTSFM 2004b, 16; McInnes interview 2005).
interview 2005). Some teachers were cobbling a living out of many different pieces of their musical career—Mark Dvorak was a particularly successful example. Others were teaching strictly on the side. Arlo Leach, for example, was working full-time as a web designer, though he had earlier been playing professionally.

Really, teaching at the School is for the love of doing it—I mean, I’m getting paid, and it’s nice extra income each month, but that’s not really why I’m doing it. I’m doing it because I love to be there and I love to be a part of it and contribute to that community. And I think that might help me have a different approach to teaching because I’m not dependent on it for my living, and I’m also not teaching thirty classes a week. I come in pretty fresh. I teach three classes a week and I really look forward to all of them. ‘Cause for me it’s an escape just like it is for everybody else—just like it is for the students. (Leach interview 2005)

Maddox was an example of someone supporting a family on his Old Town School salary. With his job running the Resource Center, mandolin and guitar classes at least two days a week, and a few private students, supplemented by the occasional outside performing gig, I estimate that he was working well over forty paid hours a week (not including practicing or teaching preparation) in order to make a living through music.

TL: Why do you teach?

CM: [immediately] I need to make a living. [snorts] I never had thought that I would teach, that was never a goal for me. I never had any specific goals, but it was never a goal that I would be a teacher. My dad and grandfather are teachers, [laughs] I wasn’t gonna do that. But in a sense, I haven’t done exactly what they did—they went for guaranteed tenure track positions, and both of them—they’re both retired as a result of it, and sitting really well. I’m not—I’m operating without a safety net, which is particularly not attractive at this point in my life. But I have to remember that I never wanted… [trails off] And it is a good, unique opportunity. That’s another reason to teach here, is because it’s possible to do, and it does seem to be paying the bills, and I’ve learned to do it—I’ve become good at doing it. [laughs] It’s become encouraging to become good at doing it, so it’s a self-rewarding process. So far it’s worked out that way. (Maddox interview 2005a)
Although the Old Town School did not necessarily offer the highest rates of pay for music instruction, it offered significant logistical and security advantages over other teaching arrangements.

We’ve had other teachers who’ve tried to set up their own schools, right—or set up their own teaching at home. You can make more money, you know, because you don’t have to give a portion to the school[…] If you want to set up teaching at your own house, then you’re responsible for your own marketing[…] You can’t make it—you get more money per student, but you can’t count on it. At the Old Town School, I’ve been able to count on it for fifteen years. (P. Tyler interview 2005)

Learning to teach

TL: How did you learn to teach?

MD: Oh, by the seat of my pants! (Dvorak interview 2005)

Mark answer to this question I asked of every teacher was typical. “By watching others,” Jimmy said, “My father was a teacher” (Tomasello interview 2005b). “I honestly do not know,” said Steve (Levitt interview 2005b). “I never did,” was Colby’s answer (Maddox interview 2005a). And Elaine replied, “Well, by doing it” (Moore interview 2005b).

The Old Town School has never offered any formal training for teachers, something that Adult Program Manager Ari Frede saw as a shortcoming, for the most part, as it precludes consistency in teaching approach.

There’s not enough professional development here for teachers in-house. There’s really none to speak of in-house. So there’s very little consistency from one teacher’s methodology to another. And there’s virtually no conversation, no guided conversation, about the philosophy that undergirds anybody’s teaching. So, with that handicap, the Old Town School “way” becomes a case-by-case basis, where every teacher, and every teacher’s class is its own animal. When you take Vocal Techniques I with Elaine, it’s going to be different from Vocal Techniques I with Gwen Pippen—sorry, that’s just the way it is. (Frede interview 2005)

The lack of an orientation can be both daunting and humbling for the new teachers themselves.
It was very quick. I’d talked to Mark about teaching […] and I talked to Jimmy and the whole thing happened in less than two weeks. And I was there, teaching[. . .] There really wasn’t a formal training session for me or orientation or an overview of what was going on. And I think a reason for that was that so many of the teachers come up through the program and have taken the classes themselves and know how everything works. I had no idea—‘cause I’d taken classes there for years, but never the guitar classes[. . .] Now, over the subsequent sessions there’s a guitar teacher meeting once every session, and that’s a good time to talk about curriculum and teaching methods and approaches that work and don’t work. So I’ve learned a lot from those. But right at the beginning, I was pretty much on my own. (Leach interview 2005)

Many teachers cited the example of a specific teacher as their mentor and inspiration;

Jason McInnes looked to Mark Dvorak for guidance:

Without having to say a whole lot, that guy really showed me how to do that, how to just play and be myself[. . .] I can’t play it like that, but I can figure out how to play this song, then from there I can figure out to play it like me, which is really different [from conservatory training]. (McInnes interview 2005)

Dvorak himself had tried to follow the model of his first OTSFM teacher, Mike Dunbar (though Dunbar had left Chicago by the time Dvorak started teaching).

To this day, I’m just so thankful I had a chance to be with him, because he knew how to run a class, he knew all about music, he knew how to have fun, he knew how to work with shy people, he knew how to challenge aggressive—you know, I think back to that, I was only in class for three, four sessions or something like that, but I still remember clearly. And I draw back on that to this day. (Dvorak interview 2005)

Others learned from observing a variety other teachers more casually. Leach visited other classrooms: “I started seeing other teachers teach, and seeing why they were doing what they were doing. And seeing that a lot of things they were doing were time-tested” (Leach interview 2005). Steve Levitt, on the other hand, and with no disrespect to his own teachers, found an independent path to his own teaching voice. “I had great teachers in my life, none of which I emulate, and none of them particularly about music” (Levitt interview 2005b).
All of these teachers learned by doing, by trial and error, within the framework of the Old Town School’s basic curricular structure and its participatory ethos, with which they were familiar with to varying degrees when they first started. And like all teachers, they made plenty of mistakes at first, like not knowing how long it will take to do something in class.

Of course in the beginning, it’s a narrower—you have less to go on. I remember the first class I planned. It was a blues class, and I spent a whole day or two or more worrying about it. I said, “OK, we’ll do these twelve things. Do this tune, that’ll take four minutes” [TL chuckles]. You do a checklist, you know? That’s how we think. We got through that checklist and I had an hour and ten minutes left to kill [laughs]. You know what I mean! You just go boom, boom, boom. So you learn. And I think that was able to sustain me over the years was, I just tried to focus on what people wanted or what they were after and if I could help them. (Dvorak interview 2005)

It is always hard to know what students can handle at a particular level, especially the lowest level. Jimmy Tomasello has seen many new teachers try to cover too much too fast.

You come in and you get this great job[....] You get this job and you’re excited, and you wanna teach and you wanna teach and you over-teach, ‘cause that’s what I did when I started teaching, you know. Group lessons, I was like, well here are forty songs, in eight weeks! And it was ridiculous. You’re thinking, well these people want their money’s worth, and I know all this music, and I want to share my knowledge with people. And you just have to slow down, slow down, slow down. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Even experienced teachers must resist the temptation: “I still have to tell myself to slow down[....] A lot of the teachers, the tendency is you want to hurry people along and give them a lot of information, but you have to slow down, down, down[.... ] You just assume people can do something, because you can do it” (E. Moore interview 2005b).

Well, a real simple example would be...with strumming the guitar, keep it super-simple. I was always frustrated because I would see at Second Half a whole room of people just strumming, down-up, down-up, down-up. And I thought that was boring, there’s so much more you can do. And as a guitar player, I always really like to find different rhythms, and make the guitar sound really interesting by using the right hand to do different rhythms. But beginning students aren’t ready for that. They need a lot of time with their left hand, and it’s really important just to get overall feel for the music and feel where the beat is and get into the spirit of
playing—for quite a while—than it is to do anything sophisticated rhythmically. So that was an example where I kind of just learned to hold back. And even though people needed to learn it to be good players, they didn’t need to learn it any time soon. (Leach interview 2005)

Some teachers had learned to teach from a young age, gradually and organically, without being aware that that was what they were doing. When Colby Maddox said that he had never learned to teach, he meant that he had never had any training; in fact, he learned in his childhood, at the same time that he learned to play.

I took private lessons in violin for a while, like three years. Or more maybe, I can’t remember. I ended up being my own teacher, with regard to the mandolin. I had to learn a lot of things like...how to structure my own learning. Had books and stuff, but I was pretty persistent and I wanted to do it my own way. So I wasn’t very good at following the rules, but then found that I had to be responsible for making it work without following the rules, so there was a lot of that. But I would show people what I was working on, taking family trips. People would say, “What are you playing?” And I would try to teach them. I’d show them, and I’d be happy if I could show them a little bit too. I’d be happy if I could get them on board with it. I’m like that, but I never got any formal training in teaching. (Maddox interview 2005a)

For Levitt, it was simply a matter of “speaking the native tongue,” since he had taken his first OTSFM as a young teen (Levitt interview 2005b).

I learned to teach here by being brought up and thrown into the pool, how I learned to swim. Walked in, got a couple students. They needed a Guitar 2 teacher, right at beginning of the expansion, adding classes. No idea what to teach or tell them[...]. But I knew the Old Town School method, the eight-week thing, sitting around and playing, how I’d learned myself. So I just started doing that. After a few sessions, I got my voice, started to feel my way through the material. Who had to get what, how I had to do this, what catalyzes a class, what destroys it, what are the variables you can control, what you can’t, what you can expect from an eight-week session. All of those things. (ibid.)

The varied paths by which these teachers learned to play and came to teaching had to somehow be transposed for students, to guide them down their own, inevitably different paths.

Interesting, don’t you think, that the teaching methods are not as varied as the learning methods? I wonder why that is, but I suspect it’s because much of what artists learn are things they pick up in weird ways. Pataphysical, if I may use the
Abbey Road term. Events that are not repeatable. Can’t take a student and put them into your shoes and walk them through your life and have them expose themselves to the same things that you were exposed to, so that they learn like you do. And since that’s patently as impossible as doing that for a child of yours, it sort of makes it inevitable that teaching methods will not reflect the learning of the teachers. That’s a dilemma always for teachers. They’re not teaching how they learned. And students don’t know that. And if they did, it might affect the trust they put in teachers. So this is one of the dirty little secrets of the bond between teachers and students. (Levitt interview 2005b)

While there is little institutional assistance in finding these transposed paths, there is also relatively little pressure for teachers to conform to a central pedagogy. “Because everybody has their own way. That’s what’s important, is everybody has to learn it their own way, everybody winds up learning to teach in their own way. There’s a lot of ways. Lot of good ways” (Dvorak interview 2005).

Teaching personalities. The lack of a standardized introduction to an Old Town School “method” naturally bred great diversity in approach among teachers, as diverse as their individual personalities. But this apparent inconsistency was perceived as a strength, more often than not; as varied as the students backgrounds, interests and goals are, it stands to reason that they would be best served by equally varied classroom styles. Cindy Rotondo’s perspective was representative of the opinions of several students I spoke with.

I don’t know that I see a specific style [to the OTSFM overall]—I think it’s based on the instructor. Thing is, they have a very talented group of artists who happen to teach. Based on the fact that you’ve got people who aren’t professional teachers, who are artists sharing their knowledge and their craft, gives each class a different feel. Every instructor has a different sensibility about the music, how they teach and relate to the music. That’s what I find to be the more interesting part of going to classes. I mean, I’m picking up some things along the way, and learning some cool songs, but it’s really more finding what the passion is of each of the instructors and understanding what is it that they bring to the music and what they share with you about the music[…] It’s good to see different instructors because they all bring something different to what they teach. As well as, they each teach different kinds of music. (Rotondo interview 2005)
Another advantage to the variety of approaches was that it allowed for second chances; a student discouraged or unhappy with a class might have a completely different reaction to the same class taught by a different teacher.

TL: Do you ever find a situation or a person or a type of person where you get resistance, instead of openness?

MD: Sure. And our school is set up as such as is—when a student reaches a certain level of resistance they generally go away. [laughs] Or go to another teacher, you know. I try to avoid the place where—I try to pick up on that before it becomes an issue. But, you know, you don’t get everyone. And I’m certain the style of presentation that is mine is not for everyone. (Dvorak interview 2005)

Personality had everything to do with it—with the teacher’s approach and choice of songs, and with the students’ acceptance or disinterest. Dvorak, for instance, was a shy student himself, and attracted such personalities to his classes.

Well, I knew what it was like to feel shy in a class, and I knew what it was like to have some guy who was really good come and take over, and it was just the most boring thing in the world to sit there and watch some guy show off. And really, that was the beginning of, what I really wanted was to be able to participate at my own level. I didn’t know those terms at that time. (Dvorak interview 2005)

The differences between teaching styles mostly seems to travel by word of mouth—and other students were more likely to have a good sense of the available options than the teachers themselves. “I’ve taught with other teachers, so I know kind of what they do. Some teachers I know what they do. Mostly I do not, because they don’t know what I do either! Unless they were my students and are now teaching on their own” (Levitt interview 2005b). Cindy Rotondo, was able to give me an overview of the teaching personalities of most of the teachers she’d taken classes from, and her reaction to them.

Cathy [Norden] was my guitar I teacher, and I could not have found a better person to teach Guitar 1. Not only was she fun and non-intimidating and non-threatening in the way that she taught—it was all about just being fun and...she was one of the class, it wasn’t—she was this very talented musician, and just had a real love about the way she did it.
Steve Levitt is at that same extreme, but in a different direction, in the sense that it’s all about the theory and the history. And what makes it work. I’m always interested—I’ve had him for a couple classes—to watch the class and see who gets frustrated[...] I really like Steve’s style. I mean, he’s so passionate about the music, and so incredibly knowledgeable about the music that...he’s just fun to be around. There’s just this excitement about what he does, he’s a little bit like that sort of eccentric professor, who you always reel him back into the topic. Or you may not get through the song in a whole session because he goes off on tangents. What you learn in the process is so incredible. That to me is the more interesting part of it. Sort of being able to connect a lot more of the dots of the bigger picture than just learning how to play a certain song.

Barb Barrows was much more performer—she didn’t relate to the class as well, but what she brought—she challenged us every week with new things that were frustrating, because it was just that much higher than our ability, but at the same time I probably learned a great deal more than I learned in some of the other classes.

Jimmy...always seemed to be preoccupied with something else. [laughs] [...] I was frustrated by the end of the class because I felt like the song we ended up doing for the big gig was probably the least interesting of any of the songs. And even though I was told by my boyfriend that it was a pretty hard song to play—because it’s always a challenge to play at the right tempo, yadda yadda yadda—I still kinda walked out going “I’d really liked to have something that made it seem a little more of a challenge.”

And Chris [Farrell], I took for half a class. It was the Guitar 3 class that I transferred out of. He’s very laid back in his approach, which seemed—that was one thing I didn’t quite relate to him as well.

Elaine was probably best teacher in the sense that [...] she was probably the only teacher I’ve had here, so far, that really had us relating as a class. Because she would every week call roll, get to know us by name, call us by name, and we started to relate to one another by name. It wasn’t just a group of people going to a classroom, meeting for eight weeks, and leaving. And if there were groups of people who knew one another, they would continue to communicate. [...] Some of the people I’ve met through Elaine’s class are people you see every once in a while. You still know them by name, and you sort of build more than a mere passing acquaintance because of the fact that you had those roots in that class. (Rotondo interview 2005)

I quote Rotondo at length to provide one person’s perspective on the range of teaching personalities available to choose from; it would be possible to find a student with the opposite
reaction to each teacher, no doubt. Alex Todd, as a mandolin student, had fewer options, but managed to take classes with both mandolin teachers in less than a year.

I guess the difference that I found with Colby and Keith is Colby from the first class gotcha doing stuff: “This is the G chord,” and as you do it, “Hey, here’s Shortnin’ Bread.” Then you progress. You had a song, then the next week you would do a song again, you would have time to practice it, then you would progress on. But you really didn’t know why the G chord was the G chord or the proper methodology of doing that. Keith took the time to explain more of the history of the mandolin, where it came from and whatnot. This is how and why you hold the pick this way, this is how you strum, it’s all with the wrist, then he’d give us a song to practice. We’d maybe go over it the next week, but we wouldn’t go into [the song] in depth. He’d just go onto the next one […] He was more of a “why” explainer, Colby was more of “this is where it’s going.” (Todd interview 2005)

Teaching at the Old Town School had myriad frustrations. The teachers did not always get along with each other; the teachers did not always get along with the students; the teachers certainly did not always get along with the administration. The compensation and job security was better than freelancing, but few would call it comfortable. And yet I had the sense from almost all of the teachers that I met that they loved the work and ultimately felt lucky to be there. Elaine Moore had had longer to reflect on it than most.

I love all those guitar teachers, they are really lovely, at least to the depth that I know them, which is not like they’re coming over to my house all the time[….] Compared to people I have met in other—if I could make generalizations about people I’ve met when I’ve had other jobs, which I could[….] I just feel so grateful that I get to come in and see pleasant people, talented people, for the most part. It’s a pleasure for me. That makes a big difference, I think. And, none of them are trying to pretend like they’re somebody else. Whereas sometimes people get so good at [pretending], they now are somebody else. And those are the people who come here for lessons sometimes, crying about their job, that they hate their job and they don’t think they’re this kind of person, and now they’ve—they were supposed to be not that person.

The people who are coming here, they’re teaching music, they love it, it’s what they do. And they’re not trying to sell something they don’t believe in[….] ‘Cause I tried, you know? While it can get sort of repetitive that you’re constantly having all these people coming through, but the people that I work with I just think are great. And I wish that there were more time for us to, you know,
have baseball teams. Although you know, no one can use their fingers. My husband, he’s great at baseball, but he won’t do it because it might hurt his fingers [both laugh].

TL: So maybe not baseball. (E. Moore interview 2005b)

The Old Town School “Way”

“There is and is not an ‘Old Town School Way,’” Ari Frede equivocated. “There is an Old Town School Way, insomuch as we’re a school, we’re a culture, there are certain things that are within the bounds of our School culture. [pause] Man, I just walked myself right into deep water” (Frede interview 2005a). It has always been notoriously difficult to define an Old Town School’s pedagogical method, and yet there was often a temptation to do so, and even to package one, because of the perceived distinctiveness of the way music is taught there. Jim Hirsch discussed disseminating it nationally in the form of an Old Town School franchise, and David Roche, rather less radically, experimented with distilling it as a model for music curricula in public schools through various outreach efforts. Although Roche’s was much less controversial than Hirsch’s, it was apparently not much more successful—“That’s turned into ‘Well, we have this funny way of doing things here, and it’s our way.’ And we haven’t really moved on from that” (Maddox interview 2005a).

The Old Town School’s underlying participatory ethos does, however, provide a base of common assumptions from which a fairly coherent set of practices organically and idiosyncratically emerge, and in that sense, Ari’s use of the open-ended term “way” seems appropriate. The strategic planning committee attempted to articulate what it was and ultimately arrived at calling it an “approach”:

The unique teaching approach of the Old Town School that produces those “magical musical moments” include [sic]:

• Opportunities for immediate student success and resulting self-confidence;
• Celebrating the strength of community and oral traditions when teaching and learning;
• A special bonding between teacher and student;
• Understanding the social and historical context of traditionally performed music, which provides deep meaning about the songs and their provenance;
• A devotion to the individual student, but complemented by opportunities to perform as part of a group;
• A non-judgmental, non-competitive relaxed learning environment; and
• Performance experiences for all levels of students.

(OTSFM 2001, 10, emphasis in the original)

The above distillation is consistent with both historical precedent and my own observations in several different learning environments at OTSFM.

Too much deviation from this approach might risk the School losing its core identity, some feared. Skip Landt represented a not uncommon view among senior teachers, that the Old Town School “way” had become less prevalent and less widely understood than it once was.

Pretty much all the classes were taught in the same teaching style; that is you could not get out of a class without actually playing in the class. And actually playing in class was actually fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty percent of what you were doing in the class. Some classes now, there’s more talking, more listening, mostly I think by people who haven’t taught for long and haven’t seen—the one way I still hope to influence is to bring more of that back as a—not as an official way of doing it, but my thought when I was doing it [i.e., creating a teaching orientation video] was that it might be something that’s down here in the Resource Center. When someone was hired, they’d be asked to come down and watch it. (Landt interview 2005)

Given the faculty’s growth in recent years, the contingent and part-time nature of teaching positions, and the informality of the training, it stands to reason that many of the newer, younger teachers might not be motivated to immerse themselves in the School’s culture and absorb that participatory ethos organically, or even be aware that they should. On the other hand, any attempt at prescribing across the board the specific content and procedures this approach should consist of would likely be resisted by the vary independent-minded faculty, and might challenge
the Old Town School ethos just as surely as not sharing an approach. Tomasello approached the matter intuitively, and expected prospective teachers to do the same.

Me personally, it’s like you want to hire from within the community, or make sure people who are coming in to be teachers, become part of what’s going on, or have some sort of…I just tell people, if they’re interested, I mean, [dopey voice] “I have a degree from blah-blah-blah”—just come in and take some classes, or come in and sit in on classes and see how we do what we do. ‘Cause there isn’t a manual, there isn’t a way of going, “Here, this is how you teach the Old Town School method.” (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Ari Frede, who has a background in elementary education, was concerned about the confusion at OTSFM over what the School was actually able to offer, educationally, and challenged the notion that it was qualified to legitimately enter into the discourse on music pedagogy.

I think when people call this place a “school,” I find it a little more a school by coincidence, and much more a cultural center, like a Y. And that’s not a put-down. But I find it…I find it presumptuous when teachers here brag about…I find it presumptuous when anybody here promotes the idea that this school is a singular institution because this is The Way and that it is an informed way. It is, and it’s limited. (Frede interview 2005a)

Although he agreed that “the oral textbook that people largely depend on” is more powerful than most outside educators would likely give it credit for (he himself wrote his master’s thesis on the value of oral methodology in blues education), he chastised OTSFM teachers for not reciprocating.

However, they’re not looking to outside teachers to inform their own teaching. So, when the two hands fail to shake, it doesn’t really mean that either of them have much to offer to the other. And there tends to be an assumption on a lot of people’s parts here that schoolteachers, in general, are ignoramuses, and are not really trying to push for the same kind of change and alternative approaches that they believe they represent here. They extrapolate from that to every worker in the education force, including traditional music teachers. And I think that becomes really insulting. Because there are amazing schoolteachers out there who are, even if they’re not teaching a class here, are doing much more to shake hands with many of the other cultural institutions and…and following that, their
methods and philosophy, to guide their own classroom, than our teachers are. (ibid.)

The rejection of conventional music education—assumed to be based on classical music aesthetics, transmitted on paper and foregrounded with theory— inherent in the Old Town School approach did translate into a defensiveness and occasionally even a sort of aggression against the music education establishment, hindering a more open exchange. Practically speaking, OTSFM teachers were not expected to have any background in education (with the exception of Wiggleworms teachers), and, like teachers everywhere, tended not to have much free time to explore new fields of knowledge beyond what their job actually required.

What does an organically interpreted “way” look like, if a shared set of goals and procedures are not mapped out? Steve Levitt saw both his own development as a teacher and his role in guiding students’ development as musicians as a sort of coalescence of small ideas into a larger coherence. “[A]s I do it more and more, I get more and more structures. ‘Cause I see more and more things. So the things that are successful start to accumulate around me and that becomes the Steve Levitt method, is the fossils of my previous meals. I think that is what eventually would become known as anybody’s method, the bones of the stuff you’ve already eaten successfully” (Levitt interview 2005b). He saw himself as a “puddle-linker,” helping students make meaningful connections between the droplets of knowledge gleaned from each new song learned.

They link that into a song they’ve heard where that [a suspended 9th chord] was in, and they really liked that. Everybody really likes that. And so they learn a mapping—that little lick is what happens in that song I like, and there’s a puddle. And then there’s something else that happens, and that happens ‘cause of the song. It’s the same thing happens in this song I like. And so guitar players start to puddle up, start to get little puddles of theory and understanding, there’s a relative major-minor thing here, but it’s not a system yet. And it takes most guitar players a very, very long time before the puddles start running together in any meaningful way. So my job is as a puddle-linker. That is what I do. I link people’s puddles
together. I go, ok, you have a puddle here, I know that you do ‘cause everybody
does. And you have one here, we all have this puddle. Here’s a system that links
both of those puddles. (Levitt interview 2005b)

But without the benefit of Levitt’s long experience, other teachers might lose track of
broader goals and fail to link the puddles; Leach, for example, worried that teachers and students
were too often pursuing superficial goals, like the accumulation of discrete songs.

The main thing that I still am working on is a general sense that students aren’t
taught to be independent of their teachers. And this plays out in a lot of issues. So
for example, the way […] a teacher writes up a lead sheet could…lead you to see
the song as a unique thing that is played a certain way and that doesn’t have
anything in common with any other song. Or, it could lead you to see the song as
a very simple pattern that’s shared by hundreds of other songs. And I think it’s
better to see the pattern and the simplicity of the songs. Because then, what you’re
learning is not just one song but potentially a whole array of songs.

I think that a lot of classes don’t make that clear, and they kind of lead students in
the opposite direction, to the point that, students take the approach of “I wanna
take these classes and learn as many songs as I can. ‘Cause each time I take a
class I learn fifteen more songs.” I try to take the approach of, in my class, we’re
gonna learn skills and concepts, and the songs are a vehicle for things. But once
you learn the skill, there’s ten songs that use it. Or you could even write your own
song using it. It’s not like each song is a fixed entity that’s completely
independent of all other songs. (Leach interview 2005)

Curriculum. The Guitar Program was large enough to demand a degree of systemization
in order to keep chaos at bay, and homogenous enough for such systemization to be practical
(i.e., only one instrument taught) and was thus better able to maintain a certain degree of
pedagogical consistency than most other programs. Here I outline the components, abstract and
concrete, of the “way” that guitar was taught at the Old Town School.

Instruction in the Guitar Program was guitar-centric. That is, concepts were not
introduced through structures borrowed from other instruments. Melodies might be easier than
chords on the piano and melodic instruments, but on guitar, chords were the quickest way to
start, with scales and melodic lines deferred until much later. Rhythms were taught as
strumming patterns. Keyboard-based music theory was avoided as much as possible, and a
theory class based on the guitar fingerboard was recommended to guitar students. The extent to
which other instrument programs similarly prioritized the biases of their own instrument
depended on how developed their curricula were.

As Guitar Program Manager, Jimmy Tomasello provided teachers with a clear and concise
list of skills to be accomplished in each class, along with a list of suggested songs, but left most
of the details to the teachers.

There’s sort of a skeleton, or a shell that people are urged to follow. It’s not
really, really closely—we don’t chase after people, like—I saw something today,
and I was like, [...] “What the hell are these people doing with an $F$ chord,” you
know? Guitar 1, you don’t do that to them! You just don’t do that to them. It’s
an eight-week class, it’s like, you make ‘em talk in one or two keys. And those
aren’t the keys! So I’ve been trying to just hold the reins on people. (Tomasello
interview 2005b)

Like most OTSFM adult group classes, guitar classes met for one and a half hours once a
week for eight weeks, culminating in a graduation night. Four levels were offered, each
subdivided into one session for “skills,” teaching the requisite chords and techniques for the
level, and a second for “repertoire,” for practicing those skills in new songs. Students were
encouraged to repeat the repertoire class until they feel comfortable advancing to the next level.
This was the structure Michael Miles had introduced in the 1980s. Concurrently, students could
explore a “Musicianship Curriculum,” of which “Guitar Fingerboard Theory” was the most
popular (five sections were offered in 2005), as well as a handful of basic courses treating
common techniques, such as fingerstyle or flatpicking. Students who had advanced beyond level
four could choose from a wide variety of guitar specialty classes, covering specific styles,
techniques and genres. Three basic classes for special audiences were offered in 2005 as well:
“Guitar for Parents & Teachers,” “Music for the Classroom,” and “Guitarra en Español.”
Guitar 1 assumed no prior experience on guitar, but could include students with no instrumental experience at all as well as former music majors. “Guitar 1 is really fun. I love the first night of Guitar 1, when they’ve never even picked up a guitar, they don’t even know what side to hold, what a fret is. There’s so many things you take for granted—I was saying ‘on the second fret,’ and this woman was saying, ‘What are you saying? Can you spell that? What? A frat?’ That’s really fun” (Leach interview 2005).

Level one focused on “cowboy and church chords,” in Tomasello’s shorthand; that is, it covers open chords in the keys of A, D, G, and E.

My feeling—you can keep people busy without playing the F chord, without that frustration, though you open up Mel Bay’s book, or Alfred’s book and it’s like, “we have to learn the key of C because that’s what everybody learns in every other instrument.” And I think Frank Hamilton, from the get-go, was about the key of D, and about the key of A. Because they’re just blockier chords and easier to form. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Within these four major keys, students learned only the I, IV, and V or V7 harmonies, plus Am and Em, which totals eleven different chord positions. Other goals specified by the curriculum included:

- A sense of playing single notes…a few licks
- Essential Boom Chicka strums in 4/4 and 3/4
- I IV V tunes in A D G and E
- A solid sense on how to read a Lead Sheet
- The desire to keep playing
  (OTSF 2004a)

Tomasello’s packet for teachers also included a week-by-week syllabus as a suggestion for how to proceed. A sample excerpt shows concepts and techniques to be covered on the left, with materials or songs to be used on the right (“book” refers to the OTSF Songbook):

**WEEK ONE**

**General Introduction**

scope of the class
overview of OTS

**BOOK**

Pay Me My Money Down
My Home’s Across [the Smoky Mountains]
parts of the guitar
strings name and number

Activities
how to read a chord diagram
posture / foot tapping
D & A7 chord
lead sheet basics “Skip to My Lou”
basic 4/4 brush strum
tuning

Good News

HANDOUT
Tuning
Guitar One Chord Sheet

Jambalaya 1/4 note down strum

C’est La Vie 1/8 note down up

WEEK TWO
Review and emphasize measures
A and E chords
Em & E7
chord changing exercises
common shapes and fingers
stress rhythm

BOOK
Shady Grove
Roll in My Sweet Baby’s Arms

HANDOUT
Lay Down Sally
Leavin’ On A Jet Plane

(OTSFM 2004a)

Choice of song was completely up to the teachers themselves; I imagine few if any would
have followed this syllabus exactly. Teachers had access to standard handouts, such as those
indicated above, but of course might make their own as well. Tomasello provided his own
students with a one-page “Welcome to Guitar 1” handout, listing the basic goals of the course,
plus a few items of advice:

bring a small tape recorder to help you learn songs…….

have something to write with

open your mouth and sing……..

for pete’s sake HAVE FUN

(OTSFM 2004a)

In Guitar 2, “you think more of this hand, the right hand, and then you get a little more
complicated in the chords, and you get the idea of maybe moving up the neck, in the shapes that
you’ve learned, without going to bar chords” (Tomasello interview 2005b). The essential goals
of Guitar 2 included:

• F chord Dm Bm (simple)
• Bass runs in keys A C D E G
• Arpeggios in 4/4 3/4 6/8
• Simple Scale knowledge
• Slash chords and bass notes on strings E A D
• A developing friendship with the capo
• The desire to keep playing
(OTSFM 2004a)

Basic rhythm and the concept of key were emphasized (including transposing from one key to another, with the aid of either a capo or a transposition chart provided as a handout), along with adding a couple of new strumming patterns. In addition to simple arpeggios and bass runs, teachers might choose to teach hammer-ons and pull-offs, alternating bass strum, or other uncomplicated ways to make an accompaniment more interesting. In addition to the recommendations from Guitar 1, Tomasello’s handout also suggested that students:

- Purchase a capo by week 2
- Know how to count to 4
- Surrender to the ONE
- Exchange #'s to get a buddy to help each other out

(ibid.)

Tomasello regarded the second level as especially crucial to solidifying students’ basic guitar knowledge. Not-quite beginners were advised to sign up at this level; the catalog description read: “If you are self-taught or have completed Guitar 2, this is the ideal level to repeat as much as you want to build up your own songbag” (OTSFM 2005). In the early 2000s, Tomasello was therefore assigning Guitar 2 Rep classes only to himself and to Steve Levitt as a checkpoint to ensure that all students were getting what they needed through Guitar 2 Skills before moving on to level three (he also mentioned Chris Farrell and Barb Barrows as qualified substitutes; all four had been involved with the OTSFM for at least twenty years and thus spoke “the native tongue,” as Levitt called it).

So that students who make it that far have to kind of be filtered through one of us[...]. And have some kind of mixture—OK, these guys got this and this and this—before they’re ready to go to bar chords. Steve and I have a totally different approach to teaching—I mean, he’s all organic, and I’m kind of like...more
methodical, maybe, at least relative to him. But I just knew that if the people had the experience of either him or me, they would be—all these young teachers that are coming through, who aren’t necessarily following the curriculum, would at least get more of a sense of things, you know. Of what we’re looking for. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Guitar 2 was actually Tomasello’s favorite level to teach...

...because people can play a little bit, and yet they’re still not...I mean, they don’t think they can play yet. [TL laughs] They’re still open to learning and there’s that kind of respect, as opposed to like [dopey voice] “Oh, what’re you gonna show me?” Which you might get more in a Guitar 4 class, where people are coming in from all other places, having been taught or self-taught, and the variety is just so wide. Guitar 2 Rep is sort of like, well, you could say, “This is what we’re gonna do! And if you don’t fit into this, then I’ll place you over here or over there, you know?” But in Guitar 4 you can say, like “I don’t think you’re really ready for this, you should go to Guitar 3,” and then, that’s a lot tougher to do. Though you’ve got to do it. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Guitar 3 introduced the dreaded bar chords, along with fingerpicking techniques. Mastering of bar chords was treated as a major milestone—or hurdle, depending on one’s anxiety levels and/or finger strength—and demarcated the difference between beginner and intermediate players. In the Beatles Ensemble, which welcomed any guitar players who had completed level two, Levitt consistently provided simplified fingerings and shortcuts for bar chords for the “those who are not bar-chord certified.” Guitar 3 essentials included:

- Major and Minor Bar Chords Shapes on strings E & A
- The chromatic alphabet along strings E & A
- A usable appreciation of I IV V in any key
- Single note tab reading
- Simple Travis style playing and reading
- Extended mastery of slash chords and chord coloration
- Memorization skills...

(OTSFM 2004a)

...and, of course, “the desire to keep playing.” The catalog course description suggests this as the level where you “find your own sound and expand comfort with your instrument.”
Guitar 4 is less prescribed than other levels; the packet Tomasello gave me did not even provide guidelines for level four. The catalog description read “Round out your study of guitar with Travis-style fingerpicking, complex orchestral chords and melody playing. Learn to read guitar tablature while surveying a vast array of musical genres”—with an open-ended invitation for teachers to chart their own course. Instead of Guitar 4 Rep, a class called “Guitar 4Ever” was offered, with “an emphasis on musicianship” and an explicit invitation to repeat it “endlessly,” if desired (OTSFM 2005c). Mark Dvorak, who regularly taught this class and drew a loyal student following, enjoyed the special challenges of a class that potentially welcomes such a wide range of ability and approached it with a front-porch sensibility.

It’s like a life sentence. And I really love that class. But sometimes you get people who come to the program—Guitar 1, Guitar 2, Guitar 3, Guitar 4, and here they are […] thirty-two weeks later, and they’re in Guitar 4Ever. And some guy walks in off the street, he says, “Ah, I’ve been playing for twenty-six years.” And so, what do you do? Right? This one person’s still working on a B7 chord, and this guy’s asking you about jazz scales, right? So one of the things I learned to do is, this guy’s been playing for so long, like, “What do you know about jazz scales?” And then he starts playing one, and I’m like, “Woh, you’ve gotta slow down!”

And all of a sudden this wonderful little thing happens—I’m going, “but isn’t that how…?” There’s a lot of knowledge in this room. When I go down to Tennessee to visit my friends, there’s no lessons. And the guy I learned the banjo from. There were no lessons. We just played and shared. And we never used those words, either. We never used those words. But that’s what happened. It was more like, “Hey, Betsy’s got a pot roast.” You know, “Ok, I’ll bring some beer.” You just get together, like people, and that’s how you would play with people. It’s how you—when you have people over for dinner, you give them an hors d’oeuvres and it’s just simple, human, connection. And so that’s the thing I think that works in a classroom better than anything. (Dvorak interview 2005)

While not given a place in the numbered sequence of basic guitar courses, “Guitar Fingerboard Theory” was “highly recommended that all students of the guitar make it a point to enroll at some point in their musical journey.” The course covered major and minor scale construction, including scale degree terminology; intervals and inversions; chord construction
and inversion, including major, minor, diminished and augmented triads and seventh chords; the circle of fifths; transposition; and improvisation. Here, finally, was the introduction to reading staff notation, something not covered in guitar levels one through four—but in the packet of handouts Tomasello provided me, nearly every visualization was some kind of representation of the guitar fingerboard, where a conservatory-style music theory class would tend to map concepts onto either the musical staff or an image of the piano keyboard. The keyboard bias of traditional approaches to teaching harmonic theory can be a leap of abstraction when one’s point of reference is a fingerboard. Visually, scales are arranged and chords are built in exactly the same arrangement on a keyboard as on a musical staff. For guitarists, on the other hand…

…for the first six, eight months, chord is shape[…. G]uitar players are shape-driven. So this begins my continual whining about that whole idea, that guitar is shape-driven, not theory-driven. And that for successful guitar players, the idea of theory is almost secondary. The first thing, it’s almost geometrical, the idea that you move shapes move up and down the neck, and they conform to cool sounds that you have already loved, and the idea of knowing what chord you’re actually playing is almost secondary to feeling the freedom to just move the chords around. So you start with the basic shapes, you move them up and down the neck, you move them north and south on the fretboard, and then you start taking the fingers off one at a time to dance them. It’s all of that variety that is the dance for guitar players—the movements up, down, north, south, and the individual dances of the chords. (Levitt interview 2005)

Most of the guitar specialty classes specified Guitar 3 as a prerequisite; after students learned to play bar chords, new worlds opened up. Some offered more in-depth instruction in styles likely already touched on in the core curriculum by way of song choices: “Blues Guitar Basics 1 & 2,” “British Pop Styles,” “Early Country Guitar,” or “Fingerpickin’ Good,” for example. Others introduced styles students would be less likely to have encountered in class, but which most would be familiar with from listening, such as “Classical Guitar for Folk/Rock Players,” “From Muddy to Buddy” (Chicago electric blues guitar), “Jazz Guitar 1 & 2,” or “Coldplay & Radiohead On Guitar.” Still others explored a range of ethnic traditions which
students may or may not have had prior exposure to, including “African Guitar Styles,” “Brazilian Guitar 1 & 2,” “Flamenco Guitar 1-3,” and “Latin Traditional Guitar Styles & Repertoire.” Before, after, or concurrently with exploring these specialty classes, guitar students might also join an ensemble class with players of other instruments (see Chapter 8).

The core curriculum is given a numerical progression through four levels partly for the comfort and convenience of students and teachers used to such educational structures; other instrumental programs, like bass guitar, mandolin, and fiddle, were structured similarly, though with fewer steps in the progression due to lower demand. But in reality, students did not need to move through the courses in a strictly linear fashion, nor were they asked to. Like Rotondo, who had chosen to return to Guitar 2 Rep after trying out Guitar 3 Skills, Pete Moore taking his own learning preferences into account in considering what classes to take next.

I was thinking that, after this one, I don’t really want to do Guitar 3 right after Guitar 2 Rep. Because it might be going a little bit faster than I’m able to do it. I do a lot of practicing on my own, so I’m pretty—by the time that I get into a class, I’ve already accomplished some of the class. Like fingerpicking, I did that three weeks before Guitar 2. So when we got to the fingerpicking, it was pretty slow fingerpicking, but it was at a nice pace for me. I’m thinking that Guitar 3, with bar chords? That’s when you start learning bar chords? And I really don’t have the dexterity yet. I want to see if I can—I don’t want to, like, miss out on that class because I can’t form the bar chords. You know? That’s what I’m worried about. (P. Moore interview 2005)

Colby Maddox regarded the course succession as a matter of rising up through lateral planes.

There is no ladder[…] It’s more about a question of inhabiting a whole lateral plane, then slowly rising up. Especially people who are signing up for lessons at the Old Town School are not looking to climb the ladder really fast. Those are the instincts of people like me, who decided long ago that this was really what they wanted to do. And they were gonna, like, go[…] So, I think, by keeping things on a lot of levels for people, I think juggling a lot of balls is my strength as a teacher, I’m continually trying to build the lateral plane, but also build ways that people can climb out of that lateral plane into new [challenges] (Maddox interview 2005a)
Through exploring challenges in any direction on one plane, students could achieve a certain degree of comfort and proficiency on their instrument, allowing them to reach further into the next plane, rather than determining their level based on completion of a set of specific exercises.

Basically, like for stringed instruments, getting the musculature together to produce a good tone that you’re going to be happy with, no matter whether you’re playing a melody, single or double string melody, chords, backup, whatever it is, just being able to have a plane of general competence, making a nice noise. That’s easy on guitar, you can do that right away. That’s a given. It’s not a given on a mandolin or a fiddle, it’s just not. It’s something that takes a long time to develop sometimes, sometimes years before people wake up and go “Wow, my tone’s really good,” or “Wow, I can really depend on my right hand to do the right thing.”

But you want to try and build that plane right away with people, so you give them stuff that A) they recognize so they don’t actually have to learn it, it’s not foreign material, and B) you give them stuff that—short assignments that can be built up by repetition, that have some kind of twist in them that makes them exciting, interesting to play. (ibid.)

The challenge was for the teacher to balance the challenges the students are experiencing, so that they stayed engaged and were able to improve, without overwhelming them.

I think that may be the distinctive part of the way I teach – I’m not afraid to give people things, leads into worlds where they may not have considered they could go with music. I think it’s important to do that, build that in constantly. If you dump something down way too much, you end up with...people just lose interest. I don’t know why they lose interest. [laughs] They’re just like, “I’m not interested. I think parasailing would be good...” (ibid.)

The Classroom experience. In my fieldnotes, I recorded my impressions of my first day of Guitar 2 Rep with Jimmy Tomasello, my second guitar class at the Old Town School.

As before, all levels of guitar met in the Concert Hall first. All the teachers were there, tuning people’s guitars for them. And as before, a PowerPoint slide show was running on the screen, with lots of old Old Town School photos[…] Then a quick intro from Barbara Silverman (How many are here for the first time? Applause for being brave. How many are back? Applause for coming back) and then the classroom assignments are read. (Fieldnotes for March 1, 2005)
Our class, with the seven or eight adults described above, met in the small basement classroom that doubled as Jimmy’s office. Students sat in folding chairs, each with a folding music stand, arranged in a small circle on a worn oriental rug. The walls were decorated with posters, both political and rock-themed, and a chalkboard occupied one wall. We went around the room introducing ourselves.

Then we moved right into playing, with a quick check on tuning (“this is an E, OK?”). [He asked a student to suggest something from the songbook and] we ended up on “Pay Me My Money Down.” He was a bit bummed—only two chords in that song. “So at least let’s play it in E (the alternate key given).” We went through a few verses on that; then, without stopping, he called out that we were going to slide it up a half step to F in four beats. We played through it in F, then went to G, then A, then I think C. Seemed like everyone could keep up with that just fine, though the F chord gave some trouble to a few people. But Jim said that’s fine, he just wanted to see if we could do it. (Fieldnotes for March 1, 2005)

He handed out an intro packet, with his contact info and the basic goals of the course, mentioning that he hoped we all come away with three or four songs that we really felt were ours. He also asked us to fill out a small slip of paper listing three tunes/artists/themes we wanted to play, the brand of guitar we played, our favorite food group and who we would want to see in concert, living or dead. The packet included a few general purpose handouts, including “Yo’ Mama’s Capo & Transposing Chart”; “Yo Mama’s Master Chord Chart” (with the root of each chord marked for each chord tab); “Where Am I and Where Am I Going To?” for bass runs.

After this very efficient introduction to the course, by exposition and demonstration, we proceeded to play through a rock song of recent vintage, “Sleepwalker,” by the Wallflowers—Jimmy assumed we would all know it. Special challenges of the song included one chord change occurring on the fourth beat of a measure, a D/F# (a D major chord with an F# in the bass), a Bm-B7-C progression in the bridge, and first, second and third endings. We would stop to practice each element briefly, but did not dwell on it; nothing was introduced as new material
and the group seemed able to keep up. Then we ran through Hank Williams’ “Cold, Cold Heart,” from a completely different era, working out a short descending run in thirds. After demonstrating, explaining and notating it in tablature on the board, Jimmy gave us several minutes to work it out on our own. This momentary sonic chaos that occurs when everyone needs to try out something new independently has happened in every group music class I have been in; it struck me at the time as unusually practical for set time aside for it. Throughout, it felt to me that Jimmy was presenting a well-rehearsed cool-teacher persona, joking about his obsession with Prince, for example. As class concluded, he mentioned that we shouldn’t worry about perfecting all of the songs that we cover in class, but just work on the ones we like the best. Everyone then moved upstairs for Second Half.

Everything about the class environment was set up to minimize anxiety. The group format was of course intended to relieve pressure from individual students. The physical environment emphasized student-teacher equality, with everyone in a circle sitting on the same kind of chairs at the same level. Oriental rugs graced nearly every classroom, as well as the stage in the concert hall, evoking a homey living room. The Old Town School Café sold beer, and it was quite normal for a student to tuck a bottle of microbrew under her chair and nurse it through class; it was, after all, the time of day when people unwind after a long day at work.

The flexible pace and accepting atmosphere also encouraged students to relax. “The classes are very informal. […]. I like the way that they kind of flow—they don’t go at a set pace. They kind of float between who’s there and what level they can do (P. Moore interview 2005). An experience of mine after a misadventure on public transportation illustrates Tomasello’s insistence on removing pressure—and my sense of tension based on past classroom experiences elsewhere was not unusual for students new to the Old Town School.
Finally got to Old Town School around 8:45. Tried to slip in, no chair—[one student] was saving a chair for a friend also supposed to be coming late. Thought that was bitchy, but then she did make a courteous effort to fetch me another chair, so OK. Jimmy gave me a handout, asked to tune my guitar and asked if I had a capo. Oops, no, it was in the Resource Center, so I excused myself apologizing profusely. “Hey, no problem,” he said, and I heard him say as I left the room, “This isn’t Catholic guitar school!” (Fieldnotes for March 22, 2005)

Obviously, the teacher’s attitude and the relationship between teacher and students had a significant effect on the classroom experience and the level of comfort students felt.

Encouragement rather than criticism was by far the preferred approach to feedback. Sallie Gaines gave an example of how Elaine Moore elicited improvement using positive feedback in Vocal Techniques 1, a class where anxiety levels tended to be much higher than in guitar classes because of the personal and emotional nature of singing.

She has the ability to give you a lot of confidence, and instead of focusing on where you did wrong, she focused on where you did right, and she said, “Now, do that again. Do that every time.” Instead of focusing on where you went out of tune, or you got the breathing wrong and saying, “Don’t do that.” And she made no one feel stupid. And…I’m still not a good singer. I mean, nothing’s gonna make me a good singer, but she gave me the confidence to get up there, and to the best of my ability, do what I should do with a given song. (Keefe and Gaines interview 2005)

Finding an optimal relationship between teacher and student and generating that happy atmosphere that leaves everyone going home feeling better was not something that could be completely predicted or controlled, however, even by the most experienced teachers.

Any time that a teacher’s into their subject, and into their students and their students are into them, and there’s that little sparky thing going on in the classroom, that’s what you’re gonna get. You’re gonna see that teacher as enthusiastic. And the teacher’ll see the students as dedicated, absolutely involved and committed.

TL: Yeah, self-reinforcing.

SL: Yeah, and it’s chemistry, in a way. And the most committed and the structured and the most enthusiastic teacher in the world can sometimes not connect with a class, to nobody’s fault. It’s not the students, it’s not the teacher.
Not all variables are controllable. Teaching’s not a domesticatable experience. (Levitt interview 2005b)

Learning by ear vs. notation

On the subject of written tablature versus playing by ear, I had this student several years ago who took three of my classes. At that time I was offering three levels of harmonica. He took them and played wonderfully, and a couple years went by, and around Christmas, his wife called me up and said, “Can you get me copies of the music my husband learned when he was in your class?” I said I was always teaching different things, I don’t remember what the songs were. And she said, “It’s really awful because he lost his piece of paper, and he can no longer play the harmonica.”

And that’s the point at which I realized I was doing the wrong thing, writing out this tablature. Not only is it bad tablature, it’s bad getting people used to relying on it. So what I do now is, now I start the class by teaching a couple of songs that are so simple they don’t need the tablature. Then I offer the first day of class, anyone who learns a song by ear, by the eighth week I’ll give them an Old Town School harmonica. Like I gave you here. If they just play it that last time. If they’re not sure, if they’ve got a song, or it’s a song I know or can figure out, I’ll tell them what the starting note on it is, I’ll make sure it’s a song that can be played where they’re starting it from, but I want them to work it out.

That’s the way they’re going to own the instrument, and that’s the way they’re going to enjoy it. If they’re always thinking about the paper, they’re gonna be lost. Like I said before, this is the evangelical style as opposed to the written word style, because the paper will always lead you astray, and it is the work of the devil. [laughs] (Landt interview 2005)

There was a constant tension over the place of musical notation within the oral learning approach champion at the Old Town School. The use of song sheets (sometimes inaccurately referred to as lead sheets) was standard in the core guitar classes and most likely in the Guitar Program overall, as well as in most other classes; the vast majority of teachers seemed to provide their students with something to take home. Mark Dvorak’s Spontaneous Folk Ensemble was one of the a few instrumental environments I encountered where notation was truly avoided. Michael Taylor did not use notation to teach djembe, but did require the purchase of a book for reference and context, which included notations of the pieces taught. Although musical notation
was avoided in vocal classes, written lyrics always seemed to be provided. The fiddle and harmonica curricula were apparently less paper-dependent than guitar.

The standard guitar song sheet—and there was a standard Tomasello and others were attempting to disseminate, with guidelines posted by the copy machine—provided the song’s lyrics, with letter names of chords (i.e., not Roman numerals) underneath the lyrics, ideally positioned to line up with the word on which the chord should change. Rhythm was not generally represented, though bar lines were often indicated with vertical lines or slashes. Melody was never given, in any form. The song sheet guidelines suggested specifying the time signature and key at the top, along with title and composer/artist; if the song was originally recorded by said artist in a different key than given, that ought to be specified as well. If at all possible, the song should fit onto one page, and certainly never more than two sides of one piece of paper. Tablature was not usually provided. The posting stressed, “These are NOT absolute rules; but guidelines provided to help bring clarity to our students”; in my experience they were fairly consistently followed. Ultimately, they asked the teacher to ask himself:

Can someone look at this lead sheet and somehow accompany this song?
Can another teacher use this sheet to teach this song to others?
Will this representation of the song help bring a student to the memorization and master of the song, or will they always be dependent on the paper?

The first two questions represent the most fundamental requirements of any notational system; the last, however, indicates OTSFM’s ultimate goal of orality.

This priority was not always easy to justify to students, in a world where everything of importance is transmitted in writing and/or recorded electronically for posterity.

I try to…I find people will mostly buy it, one time. They’ll try it, whatever you suggest. When you get a little further along, I think people have a clearer idea of what they want to do and how they want to do it. But I always try to make people play, by using their ears and their hands. And that’s always a big step for people. But I just feel like, you’re paying money, you’re investing time in here, this is the
truth as I see it: if you want to play, you have to learn to use your ears. And people will say, “Oh, I’m a visual learner.” Well, you may be. But it’s got nothing to do with it, really. And that, writing things down has its place and its value, but I try to do that. And I find people are generally willing to try that. And I’ve found that to be the most successful thing. (Dvorak interview 2005)

Students often equated learning music with learning to read music—it is embedded in our colloquial language, where “the music” can refer just as often to the physical paper on which musical notation is printed as to the sound. This could generate deep anxiety for aural learners, as with Sallie Gaines, above, but could also result in disappointment that the Old Town School does not necessarily teach reading, as was the case with Judy Davis.

See, when I joined to play the guitar, I thought, I was so not knowing about music. I didn’t know that guitar parts aren’t reading music. They’re written with the letter above the—well, either above a staff, like it is on piano music, or--. So the wonderful thing is I realized, I’ll learn this instrument without the confusion of having to learn music. That was great fun when I first started—I learned that in the first week. But the great disappointment also, that my lifelong desire to read music, was not going to be fulfilled there. But I had to learn it that way. Because if I would’ve gone about it this way [gesturing to sheet music], by taking cello as my first music, I probably would’ve given up by now. (Davis interview 2005)

The advantage of notated music was, of course, that students could learn new material faster, and therefore could at least try out more songs; it supported the OTSFM principle of playing music right away. When Colby taught mandolin, he used tablature some of the time, and occasionally staff notation as well.

I put a lot of stuff together on paper so that I can get people to play right away, but if someone can’t read tab and it’s completely a barrier, then I have to go back to familiar melodies. But I just go back and back and back to a point where I don’t have any further to go. Like we’re playing “Skip to my Lou.” And just trying to make that sound interesting, musically exciting for them, sell them on it. I think I can be a pretty good salesman, have learned to be one.

TL: How do you do that?

CM: Just make “Skip to my Lou” sound like the most awesome song you ever heard in your life. (Maddox interview 2005a).
Even tablature, though, is more accessible to beginners than staff notation.

TL: Do you read music?

AT: I at one time could [laughs]. With a piano, you learn all of them. I know that at one point in time, I did know them all, I could still point out middle C and could still pick it out on a piano[...]. Maybe if I had a refresher course I could pick it back up. And with the mandolin, thank God for the tab, because if I had to read it, I wouldn’t know what I was doing. Which I think is brilliant—“This is the chord, and this is the string.” “Oh, alright! Nice!” (Todd interview 2005)

Ultimately the partial reliance on written transmission is an inevitability at the Old Town School, in most circumstances. Oral transmission and aural learning require constant repetition and reinforcement—certainly for students not accustomed to learning in this way. Oral traditions presuppose cultural immersion. Most OTSFM students spend about two hours a week there; how much time they spend reviewing what they learned at home varies from person to person, but they are nearly always practicing it alone, in an environment removed from the one in which they first encountered it. Notation, then, simply makes it possible for them to retain information from week to week. But the minimalist songsheets used by the Guitar Program serve as memory jogs, rather than reifiable artifacts; it would be difficult to refer to them as “the music.”

_Songs._ Songs were the vessels that carry music to the students. Because striking the right balance between familiarity and novelty is so crucial to musical pleasure, song choice directly affects educational experience. Song choices served to express the teachers’ knowledge, attract and engage the students, and frame the educational experience. Teachers were largely given free rein to pick their own songs in class, and students could have direct input, as in Tomasello’s classes, or indirect, in that teachers take note of and respond to student reactions. Guitar students and teachers, particularly in the lower level classes, played together every evening at Second Half, where a balance had to be struck between finding to a common denominator in taste and compiling a selection that reflected diverse tastes. Alex Todd mentioned that he was practicing
mandolin for Colby’s class more willingly than he had done for his last mandolin class, or the instruments he had studied as a child; I asked him why.

I think, it’s that we’re playing recognizable songs, and I kind of noticed this even between the two intro classes I took, that Colby and Keith taught. Very different teaching styles. And I think they both did a good job […] But I found myself practicing the songs that Colby gave me more than Keith’s, because I recognize “Oh, ‘Norwegian Wood.’ I know ‘Norwegian Wood!’” Or the twin-spins that we get now “Oh, I know ‘Maybelline’ or Chuck Berry.” So I’ll take that home and practice that. Even the fiddle tunes that I don’t know like “Folk Beer” or “Whiskey for Breakfast”—they’re so much more fun sounding than the bass of a tuba, or the beginning—‘cause when I took piano I was five, six, seven, eight years old, you’re not gonna learn great melodies at that age. So it’s just kind of boring, practicing your scales. So I think it’s just I’m able to see the end result more. I think I’m able to make music. (Todd interview 2005)

There is an Old Town School Songbook, and has been since 1958 or 1959, when Frank Hamilton, Win Stracke and other OTSFM teachers compiled the first one. It was sold in the Different Strummer Music Store for five dollars. During the period I attended the School, it was only lightly used, though it still held significant symbolic importance as the core repertoire of the School. “I would think the Songbook kind of ties the levels together[…] Anybody who really knows their instrument can take that songbook and teach any level of musicianship to any instrument. Period. ‘Cause those songs are, they’re the American legacy of music. It’s great stuff” (Tomasello interview 2005b). The version of the Songbook current in 2005 was a 1992 revision, apparently watered down from earlier versions.

That songbook, originally the teacher’s kit, and then had become sort of a grab bag of all the coolest tunes, as every teacher would add a song here, add a song there. By the late seventies the thing was a beautiful, awesome legal nightmare! And that’s what happened in the eighties. The School grew a little bit, lawyers came around and said, “No. You can’t do that, you can’t use this, not even for not-for-profit. Because you’re selling this book.” So the School was forced to decide whether A) to deal with the publishers of all of this material, try to get permission—and they would all want money and the School didn’t have money, really, or [B] to purge—scrub the book of everything. And that’s what they did, they scrubbed it. (Levitt interview 2005b)
The 1992 edition, edited by Michael Miles and Elaine Moore, includes 108 songs, the vast majority of which are in the public domain, either because of age or unknown authorship. OTSFM got permission from songwriters with past associations with the School for handful of copyrighted songs, like “The City of New Orleans,” by Arlo Guthrie, “Puff the Magic Dragon,” by Peter Yarrow, and “Roll Me On the Water,” by Bonnie Koloc. A few have known authorship, and were even pop songs at one time, but are so old most people consider them folksongs: “Buffalo Gals” and “Red River Valley,” for example. Although the Bob Dylan songs that once populated the Songbooks pages were purged for legal reasons, several Woody Guthrie songs remain, including “Gypsy Davy,” “So Long, It’s Been Good To Know You,” and “This Land Is Your Land.” Very few of the songs have overt political messages, but “Union Maid” is still there. The rest hail primarily from North American Anglo- and African-American traditions, ranging from “Amazing Grace” to “Drunken Sailor,” “Shady Grove” to “St. James Infirmary,” “Greensleeves” to “Pay Me My Money Down.” No foreign language songs are included. A twenty-eight page musical manual concludes the book, covering basics like “How to tune a guitar,” “Strumming Patterns,” “How to read music,” etc. The inside front and back covers display basic guitar and banjo chord charts, respectively.

Increasingly, however, teachers were not familiar enough with these songs to effectively teach them. Even in the early 1990s, when Steve Levitt first returned to OTSFM to teach, he had the alienating sense that the Songbook’s time was passing.

The teachers that were coming in didn’t have what I took to be the normal thing, which is a lifelong connection to the book, and to the format of the school. The book, the sacred book, the bible, the Old Town School Songbook. I knew all those songs from time immemorial, for me. Those were songs I knew at thirteen, when I came to take me lessons—the Weavers were singing them, I was hearing them on records, they were being played everywhere. It was not Latin, it was the living language of the music around me[......] It’s hard to remember—it’s hard to believe that there are songs like “The Dutchman,” in the seventies here, the mid-
seventies, that you could get a hundred people singing “The Dutchman” together without books, without anything, not a dry eye in the house, just like, you know, you figure the candles are lit, the whole thing’s happening here. That can go away so quickly. These things are very tenuous. The foundations, the pillar of tunes of the community go through great changes. (Levitt interview 2005b)

The songs in the Songbook were simply not very relevant to OTSFM students of the twenty-first century. “My impression is that my community of students has no natural connection to those songs at all. Almost without exception[…] As I’ve made my attempts over the last twelve to thirteen years to work with those songs, I’ve found…people think they’re kids songs, or they’re just old things” (Levitt interview 2005b).

They don’t know ‘em now! There’s ten or fifteen that they might know for sure by name, there’s another twenty that they might recognize the melodies to, or hear that internal resonance. But yeah, that’s where the Beatles thing, that’s the folk music that people know, people grow up with, so that…Number One artist of any graduation is gonna be the Beatles, followed by Neil Young, and maybe the Eagles are third. This is where people are expecting they’ll play on guitar, this is what they’ll hear. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

In the mid-1980s, teachers began making “twin-spins” as an alternate approach to song sharing to update and refresh the repertoire. A twin-spin was a double-sided handout with a different song on each side, usually related thematically in some way, passed out and sung at Second Half. Since these were classroom handouts, not published or sold, the fair use principle applied. Twin-spins presented at Second Halves I attended were an eclectic mix of vernacular American styles, approximately half dating from 1960 or later. They included: Big Bill Broonzy’s “Key to the Highway” / Bob Dylan’s “Buckets of Rain”; “Fist City” / “You Ain’t Woman Enough to Take My Man,” both by Loretta Lynn; Chuck Berry’s “Maybelline” / Buddy Holly’s “That’ll Be the Day”; Neil Young’s “Sweet Caroline” / The Byrds’ “Mr. Spaceman”; and James Taylor’s “Traffic” / Rod Stewart’s “Tonight’s the Night.” Even the Eurhythmics’
“Here Comes the Rain Again” and Prince’s “Kiss” made appearances (though not, I think, on the same twin-spin).

In Cathy Norden’s Guitar 2 Skills class we played only one song from the Songbook, “Done Laid Around”; the rest were 1970s rock and country (“Beth” by Kiss, and two John Denver songs), 1980s alternative rock (REM’s “Driver 8” and NRBQ’s “When Things Was Cheap”), and two Beatles songs, which represented the oldest end of the spectrum. Jimmy Tomasello brought in only two from the Songbook in Guitar 2 Rep, one of which was suggested by a student; aside from a Hank Williams song and a Phil Ochs song, everything else we sang was from either the 1970s or the 2000s—Tomasello was making an effort to stay current in his song choices.

Familiarity did vary by musical taste and interests, of course, and there remained a minority who sought out the older, more traditional material.

There are a few, and you can see what the percentages are here. They tend to be in the old timey ensemble, they tend to be playing those instruments, they tend to be hanging with Mark [Dvorak] and with Chris Walz and the more traditional—the teachers who are in a sense specializing in more traditional tunes. Rather than, as I do, a sort of a second echelon fifties-sixties-seventies-eighties people. (Levitt interview 2005b)

Maddox felt obligated to include a certain dose of “Ye Olde Folke music stuff” in his classes.

Because everybody knows those, they’re deeply embedded. There’s gotta be a way to get them to come out on the instrument. But that cannot be the whole focus, because a steady diet—more than twenty-five minutes of that in any class and people are gonna get really restless. And preferably keep it to fifteen or ten if you can. And then, you have to go for stuff that’s pop music oriented. As far as that goes […] as long as I can wrap my head around something, I don’t mind doing anything. […] I can be just as happy doing an REM song as a Credence Clearwater song. And I’m not the type of person who says “Oh, that’s not folk music.” Because, that is fucking folk music, you know? [laughs] If people remember it, and it sticks deeply, it’s folk music. And, what is the difference between John Cougar Mellencamp and Woody Guthrie? Not much. [laughs] (Maddox interview 2005a)
Inevitably, student reactions to song choice ranged widely. People of different generations of course reacted differently to pop songs of different decades; Cindy Rotondo was very excited to learn “Dixie Chicken,” a 1973 song by the band Little Feat, in Cathy Norden’s class, while someone of my generation might well never have heard of it. “It’s one of those songs where, you know—it’s just fun, because it’s like, wow, I can go to my peers and say ‘I learned how to play “Dixie Chicken,”’ and they go ‘Wow!’ Whereas if I tell them I learned something by Wilco, they go, ‘Who?’ So... [laughs].” Students of course complain sometimes: “I do know that there have been comments of frustration among some people about their sense of only playing certain kinds of music. That we weren’t getting to the more esoteric or weren’t playing the things that—what they may perceive as being more current music” (Rotondo interview 2005). But most students I talked to (and those who volunteered for interviews were those who were more excited about their experience) seemed to appreciate the variety, which gave them the opportunity to open their ears to new things and helped them make broader connections within American music.

If you play something that’s a more traditional folk song, and then play something by Wilco, you can see the ties[...] I actually listen to more Dylan now. I didn’t relate to Dylan when I was young. We were both in our “heyday.” I just couldn’t connect to that music. It’s interesting that the School has really helped me to develop more of an appreciation in his music than I probably would have ever had on my own[...]. Partly because of the amount of it you get to play in class, and then the fact that there is so much of it being played and that in some cases, the instructor has a story to tell about why that song they’ve chosen, or that... It’s really just helped to give me more of an interest in him as an artist, because I didn’t see the musicality in his music initially, but now I have a more educated ear, and more of an understanding. (ibid.)

The Second Half

One of the more unique aspects of OTSFM instruction is its tradition of the Second Half; Steve Levitt describes it as “the wine and the wafer of the experience.” After class each evening,
Second Half was held in the Concert Hall; it could be considered part of class and guitar teachers encourage attendance, but technically, one did not have to be enrolled in anything to drop in and sing. Intended as a group jam session, Second Half gave guitar students an opportunity to practice newly acquired skills (as well as older ones) playing along on a familiar song. The teachers were miked, lined up in front of the stage (never on the stage) facing the students. They would take turns choosing and leading songs, the lyrics for which were projected onto a screen behind them. With the teachers in front, the semicircular seating arrangement in the Concert Hall became a circle, and the pew-like benches (not theater seats with armrests) facilitated guitar playing. A twin-spin written up and led by a particular teacher (the task assigned in rotation) would conclude each evening. In the course of each song, some teachers would solo on verses. The chord progressions were simple, so that level one students could soon play most of them (sometimes leaving out chords they didn’t know or playing simplified versions of them), level two students were challenged to play the chords as given, and level three and four students could add in bass runs, riffs, finger-picking, and other more advanced techniques (though in practice these upper-level students often did not attend). Elaine Moore compared Second Half to a hootenanny, a forgotten hold-over from another time.

Well, I feel like it’s always a surprise to people who come here[.....] I think it is truly unique in this day and age! [laughing under her words] Because I think it came and went, as far as being in style, sweeping the nation about forty-five years ago and we’re the only ones who still have it! [laughing] But, it’s great! It’s something! (E. Moore interview 2005b)

*Second Half as education.* Second Half was framed as an educational experience, as an extension of class, intended to teach strategies for playing in a somewhat mixed group. The Old Town School Songbook was used more heavily here than in most classes. Most songs, whether from the Songbook or not, were projected onto a screen at the back of the stage, to encourage
students not to read their books, but lift their eyes. When the equipment worked, this strategy seemed largely successful. A description from my field notes of a Second Half on the first day of a new session gives an example of the kind of quick, shorthand teaching that would occur.

Somewhat atypically, all songs except for the twin-spin were from the Songbook on this night.

Barbara Silverman kicked off Second Half proper. Of course it had to be a Guitar-1-friendly night, and all they had so far was D and A7. First off was Elaine leading “My Home’s Across the Smoky Mountains” [...] Then there was “Colorado Trail,” led by Jacob Sweet[?] which had a lot more chords, including Bm, and Guitar 1 students were advised to just play D if in doubt. Then “Pay Me My Money Down” again. And finally, a twin-spin [...] from Steve: “Key to the Highway” and “Buckets of Rain.” For the first, he showed us quickly how to do a slow blues shuffle, with the barred A, moving the third finger up one fret on one string every other beat. And at the end of it, credited Big Bill Broonzy—he is always mentioned with importance here, though this time his connection to the School wasn’t. And for the Dylan song, Steve showed Guitar 1 students the one-finger G if they wanted to try it. And started out singing it straight, but morphed into a Bob Dylan impersonation by the end of it. (Fieldnotes for March 1, 2005)

One of the recurring lessons at Second Half was how to keep playing even without knowing everything the song required, something Arlo Leach and many other teachers prepared their students for.

…[T]here are lots of little bits of wisdom passed out informally. So, one of my favorites, for example, is if you’re playing a song and you don’t know the chord, just mute the strings and keep strumming, as if you’re playing the chord, ‘cause that way you don’t stop and lose the rhythm. On the very first night of classes I tell my students that—I call it the secret X-chord, which they can use to secretly pretend they’re playing. And then I’d send them up to Second Half. These were the kind of just little tips that certainly I was never taught—’cause I was pretty much self-taught. It was very helpful to have a repertoire of those things to throw out when you can see that people are struggling with something. (Leach interview 2005)

The cover of the crowd could encourage students to experiment and make mistakes more freely than in class, too, providing a kind of trial-and-error educational opportunity.

Sometimes, you know, if you get whatever the note is that’s the key of the song, just hit that one note repeatedly and it’s going to be fine. The other thing I tell them which is the most important thing, which I’m sure the guitar people tell
them too, is that no one there is listening to you – they’re all listening to themselves. Therefore, if you just want to sit there and toot along without listening to me, or just doing whatever you feel like, no one’s going to have any idea whether it’s right or wrong, up, down, backwards, and why not. Why not do it? (Landt interview 2005)

Second Half as participatory experience. Second Half is perhaps the most explicit instance of participatory music making at the Old Town School, where it is not only practiced, but demonstrated and taught. Everyone performs, and the only audience consists of the performers themselves; even the teachers do not play separately (as they sometimes do in class). In Turino’s analysis, true participatory traditions offer a valued place for people at all levels of expertise to join in simultaneously, from parts as easy as hand clapping to virtuosic soloing. These parts tend to be organized in core and elaboration roles, where certain elements (not necessarily the simplest) are essential to the performance and comparatively unchanging, while others provide interest and variation (Turino 2008). Clearly, Second Half is modeled on this same principle (if practically limited to guitar for the most part) welcoming players of any skill level. A range of technical challenge is available; for most beginners, the challenge is in keeping up with a song in performance; there is no stopping or going back over the trickier parts. The fact that the virtuoso teachers are the ones with mics taking the solos, however, relieves students of the need to make the music sound interesting; providing the basic musical pulse suffices.

Turino argues that participatory traditions tend to exhibit specific sonic features, like open cyclical forms that make it easier for people to join in and textural and timbral density that serves to cloak the inevitable lack of precision (Turino 2008, 36). Certainly, no one would describe the sound of a Second Half as limpid. While an attempt was generally made to keep everyone in tune, it was never truly feasible among forty or fifty guitars. Nor could everyone be counted on to feel the beat in precisely the same way (or to physically execute whatever beat
they might be feeling, for that matter). The strength of the group singing varied considerably from night to night and song to song. The teachers usually sang strongly into their microphones to encourage participation, but on low-energy nights or unpopular songs, they might be the only voices truly audible; other times, even a small group of enthusiastic singers among the students could enliven the room. Since beginners almost invariably constituted the larger part, if not the majority of the players on any given night, core and variation parts were not always well balanced, and often only the most basic strumming pattern could be discerned among the benches, repeated for every song, counterbalanced by the most elaborate solos from the teachers, with little in between. The gap between the two groups’ skills, however allowed students to slip into a more passive audience role as they watch their teachers perform, compromising the participatory experience.

Many of the less pleasing sounds emanating from Second Half could be at least partially attributed to the sheer scale it had reached on weeknights in Lincoln Square, and a much more intimate and evenly textured sound could be experienced at smaller Second Halves on weekday mornings and at the Armitage location.

I sometimes get a little aggravated with it, the way it is now. Just because to me, it is not a very musical experience, a lot of the time. It depends. Totally depends. Sometimes I go out where the students sit, and it just sounds like cacophony. How can they stand this? But other times it’s much better. A lot of it has to do with the volume of the PA, maybe the song, if people are really at a tempo they can handle and chords they can handle and they’re singing. So there are ups and downs. (E. Moore interview 2005b)

Since effective participatory music experiences (as Second Half was, by and large) are relatively rare in cosmopolitan consumer society, the event could come as a surprise or even a revelation to new students.

The first class here, and I almost just kinda—Colby was talking about Second Half, and I almost snuck out because I didn’t know what was going on, but I went
down, and I just had a blast. So the next day I went to work, and was like, “You wouldn’t believe this. They had the class for the first hour and fifteen minutes, then there’s a break, then everybody gets together in the auditorium, and they all play these songs together. And it’s cool because the only ones who have microphones are the teachers, so it sounds good, even though all the students are the ones playing and messing up, but the teachers with the microphones override everything, and it sounds nice.” So yeah, I talk it up. (Todd interview 2005)

Guitar students who love the Old Town School tend to love Second Half. Pete Moore, a relatively new student, even described the experience as “addictive.”

PM: I do like the atmosphere of going into the auditorium at the end. That really made a big impression on me, the first class, which was that we learned two chords, and then we went in and played with a lot of people, and that was what I think everybody’s heart was…addicted.

TL: Addicted?

PM: Yeah. So, the fact that they’re sounding good, even if it’s within their own mind, you know? [both laugh]

TL: So you find the Second Half addictive? Or the guitar…?

PM: Sure! Well, the atmosphere became addicting in the Second Half. It’s also the fact that you can have a beer, sit down, makes it even more like a…a real relaxing experience, something that you want to…I don’t think I’ll ever forget that, actually. Now, when you go in, we play songs that—we’d like to get more complicated songs? But we do have to keep in with Guitar 1 people. But every now and again, they’ll throw one in there that has a lot of F’s and that’s a—you know, John Prine or something—and that’s good. (P. Moore interview 2005)

Judy Davis even continued going for a year after completing the core guitar sequence.

Oh, I loved it. I loved it. In fact, after I was done with my lessons, 1 thru 4? I was paying for [private] lessons, right? I still continued to go. Well who’s gonna kick you out? Nobody. You know, you show up, it’s Second Half, they assume you must have just finished the beginning. Steve watched me go in there for another year. Steve would smile, like “Whatcha doing?” you know? And I would just go in there and play. […] Second Half was probably the thing that really kept me coming. Because I, too, am a performer at heart. (Davis interview 2005)

By no means did all students attend; the late hour made it difficult for people with children or early work hours. “I wish it was more populated but I think the timing of it makes it
hard,” Colby said. “My ass is dragging by 9:30—it’s time to go home” (Maddox interview 2005a). Rotondo seemed representative of many guitar students for whom the novelty had worn off: “When I was a newer player, I came probably more often. It’s more of a timing thing than anything else, by 9:30 I’m really ready to get home. Start, if I have stuff for work or something to do, I wanna spend a bit of time doing that, spend a little time unwinding” (Rotondo interview 2005).

Second Half did not always “work.” Some nights seemed energized, other nights limp. While a group of teachers in high spirits was generally a good thing, sometimes the teachers’ energy could actually be detrimental to the collective experience.

I think it sounds much better when you’re standing up there with the other teachers [chuckling] […] But we’re occasionally reminded it’s about the students, don’t do any songs that are too hard, slow down, explain. And of course you have to be reminded of that—it’s 9:30 at night, and it’s really fun if someone starts playing something and you’re having a good time and Wooo! Go! Some of you don’t know F#min, C#min, too bad, we’re gonna play it! Because it’s satisfying for the teachers. (E. Moore interview 2005b)

Some nights the teachers’ leadership is better than others. Leadership issues were addressed by assigning one teacher as the “point person” for each Second Half; “they get paid a little more money—very little more money […] a bit more of an ownership thing going on.” Without someone at the helm, Maddox felt it could sometimes turn into “mob rule.” “Most of the people that come here have no music in their culture at all. I grew up with it in my living room, so I—that’s just not the way everybody experiences music. Usually, it’s this rare kind of package that only unpacks itself a few times in people’s lives. We are that for people, so I think we kinda owe it to them to not get up there and fuck around, basically” (Maddox interview 2005a).

Graduations and special Second Halves

Graduation was really something. It was a pumped up room, most of whom stayed straight through till the end, till 10:30. When we got up there, the room
was in an uproar over the belly dancing class, bumping and shaking away on stage and on the floor in front of the stage. I am always so impressed with the confidence those women display, with their imperfect, all-shapes bodies in black leotards and scarves stitched with coins wrapped around their hips. They usually look like they’re having a blast, and the other students in the audience just love it, I have never heard a discouragement, criticism, cat-calling or other down-putting expressions. (Fieldnotes for April 19, 2005)

At the end of each eight-week session, Second Half turns into a “graduation.” Class is shortened, and a lengthier Second Half features all or most of the guitar classes, as well as several non-guitar classes, each performing one song representative of what they have been working on that session. It is a different line-up each day of the week and is an opportunity for students to hear what the other classes have been working on. Unlike regular Second Half, it resembles a staged performance, before a (somewhat) passive audience. It is, however, a very safe and supportive environment in which to debut. Since the majority of audience members will take their turn playing, it is akin to what Turino has called “sequential participatory performance,” of which karaoke is a classic example.

And as in karaoke, stage fright is mitigated by the empathy felt among these inexperienced performers. In his ethnography Karaoke Nights, Rob Drew describes the recovery of a karaoke performer after a mid-song disaster and the audience’s rescue and acceptance of him, strikingly similar to the kind of solidarity achieved during an Old Town School graduation:

…[T]he folks at Mickey’s thereafter address him by name, they kid him about his troubles onstage—they like him. […] It seemed that his very loss of composure (“I don’t know these words!”) was the act that precipitated his recovery. Such “one-down” moves—excuses, apologies, disclaimers—are common face-saving strategies in everyday interaction, but tend to be suppressed in onstage performance. (One public speaking textbook counsels emphatically, “Never place on your listeners the burden of sympathy for you as a speaker.”) In karaoke, though, the crowd’s sense of inclusion and its understanding of the severity of the task foster a readiness to accept self-deprecators and even to root for them […] the self-deprecator knows she’s bad (as does everyone else) but wins the crowd over through sheer pluckiness. (Drew 2001, 45, emphasis in original)
To someone who has never tried to learn an instrument from scratch as an adult, Guitar 1 students’ laborious strumming of three chords can seem at best boring, perhaps comical, and at worst quite irritating. When ten such students are playing together, with varying intonation and rhythmic sense, the sound does not improve. But at an Old Town School graduation, the entire audience had been through it before and could appreciate just how difficult it is to play a bass run from G to C in level one, or an F major chord in level two. A seemingly simple trick like those could generate uproarious applause and whistles of approval. Alex Todd remarked to me at one of these events that this was something truly unique about the Old Town School. “It’s basically a grade school performance,” he said, “but kids don’t know better, so they don’t mind the imperfections. Adults do know better, they know what it’s supposed to sound like, but they get up there and do this anyway and everyone supports them” (Fieldnotes for April 20, 2005). A couple of days later, Pete Moore gave me a similar reaction: “It was good. They had, the whole atmosphere is to support each other, and you really felt that. It didn’t really matter if you didn’t sing well or whatever. That was the whole point. Everybody was in the same boat, and they all appreciated each other’s performances. That was the best thing about it. And some of them were actually outstanding, I thought” (P. Moore interview 2005).

The Tuesday, April 19, graduation I described above sustained its celebratory tone throughout the evening. A few highlights are excerpted from my notes, below:

Already pumped up from the bellydancing, the Guitar 1 classes were welcomed and encouraged with special exuberance, I thought. I think there may have been a small group in the audience mainly responsible for infecting everyone else. There were these guys, thirty-something guys I guess, who had the kind of loud camaraderie typically associated with sports—high-fiving each other and egging each other on. Beer was undoubtedly involved. They weren’t even in the same class, nor were they all sitting together.

[….Barbara Silverman’s Guitar 1 Skills class] did “Leaving on a Jet Plane.” The audience/other students joined in heartily. Cheers broke out for the dramatic
pause in the strumming pattern—the other students knew that was a touch that took some work for Guitar 1 students. When they finished, to robust cheering and applause, BS complimented them on their great job singing and keeping the rhythm and said she was very proud of them.

[...] Next up was Mary Peterson’s Guitar 2 [...] This was Peter Moore’s class. One black woman—the first black student I’d noticed. They played some sixties or seventies rock ballad thing I didn’t recognize, but much of the audience did. Someone shouted out “You rock!” Mary replied “We do rock! We folk!”

[...] Then was Victor Pichardo’s Mariachi Band. It was much, much better than the last time I heard them, in December. Also better instrumentation: 1 trumpet (Jason), 1 violin, 1 mandolin, 2-3 guitars, 1 big mariachi bass-thing, 1 lead singer (also one of the guitars) and 1 harmony singer (singing only), + Victor on guitar. [...] Only a couple of the students looked like they might be of Mexican extraction. They sang a love song from Puerto Rico. Arranged, of course, and I believe they were reading music.

For that matter, nearly everyone was reading something on a music stand, in all of the classes. And occasionally the air would come on and blow someone’s music away, a potential that made some nervous.

Mark Dvorak came up next [...] As they were setting up, Mark made some joke about how they were going to sing in English. He gave a little introduction to the group and what they’d worked on. Chiefly: bar chords! Big cheer. He gave an explanation of what bar chords are, how they work, and what they enable you to do. “Afraid no longer of the key of F!” They did “Dream a Little Dream,” very quietly—it had lots and lots of chord changes; they said they lost count at 47. The room was very impressed.

[...] Steve Rosen was next with Fiddle 3 [...] They fiddled bravely through a fiddle tune, he accompanied on guitar. Beginning fiddlers just never sound good, especially together.

Finally, the Soul Ensemble, taught by Bill, Alton Smith [...] Very, very much about performance, presentation, soloing, virtuosity on the part of the singers (much less so about the instrumental solos, though they had a great groove going). That was it.

As everyone was leaving, someone struck up another soul song, “In the Midnight Hour,” several people, including JT, gathered round Alton at the piano. Others of us stood around and listened. (Fieldnotes for April 19, 2005)

As the vignettes above show, graduation was one of the few opportunities Old Town Students had not only to get a sense of what lay ahead in their own curriculum (e.g., bar chords can be
mastered!) but also to get a sense of the range of course offerings, beyond the minimalist descriptions in the course catalog; most guitar students would not otherwise have a chance to hear the Mariachi or Soul Ensembles, and might not realize bellydancing could be so welcoming.

Graduation was also a chance to develop a sense of camaraderie, perhaps feel a part of a larger Old Town School community. Within classes, rehearsing and performing a song on stage was a small bonding opportunity. But more importantly, the event could show how both values and knowledge were shared across classes and departments. An demonstration of shared knowledge occurred on the next day’s graduation, which opened with the Irish Stepdancing class, dancing to a recording as our mandolin class arrived.

They were playing a tune Colby knew and he started playing along almost as soon as we got in the door. Pretty soon the CD track ended and the teacher tried to restart it on the mini-boom box, but completely failed. The teacher said, “Keep going!” and the audience tried to keep up the slack by clapping along and Colby, after a little fumbling, got it going to cover for the rest of the performance from his seat near the back. (Fieldnotes for April 20, 2005)

There was a shared sense of concern for instruments; at one point, “someone’s guitar fell over from where it had been propped up on the floor with a resonant thud. A great ‘o-o-o-h’ of concern rose up from the room. ‘It’s ok!’ someone hastily called out.” And as always, a firm commitment to inclusiveness; audience members tended to sing along to any song they knew, and sometimes even joined classes they were not taking: “Just as they were about to start, a former student of [Mary Peterson’s] called from the back of the room, ‘Can I play?’ ‘Do you know what we’re playing and are you in tune?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Then come on up.’ So we had to wait for him to find a seat on stage” (ibid.).

Not all classes performed at Second Half Graduation; for one thing, that would have been unwieldy. But many have other, more appropriate venues at which to cap off their experience. Two alternative end-of-session events for the rock ensembles are recounted in the next chapter,
but these were both to some extent “in-house,” for an audience of themselves. Some ensembles would leave the School all together. The Torch Songs class, for example, would sing at a club, and the Blues Ensemble had a long tradition of performing at the well-known blues club Buddy Guy’s Legends every eight weeks. Though Ari Frede encouraged non-guitar teachers to bring their classes to graduation, he also stressed “how important it is to me that they try to keep the music in the cultural context,” when possible. “I think for some classes it’s really important to get their graduation outside of the school. I mean, what does it mean if an electric blues band climbs on our stage? When they have an opportunity to play Buddy Guy’s? Let’s keep it real. [laughs]” (Frede interview 2005b).

Shortcomings and debate. Second Half sometimes failed to live up to what participants imagined it could be or remembered that it had been.

It has the potential to be the most important part of any of the experiences of any of the nights in the core guitar curriculum. And a great mingling. The fact that lately, and because of various things, it very often does not live up to its potential, or does not show power that is implicit in that has been something of a mystery to us for years. We’ve discussed it in meetings and debated it, and tried this tried that and tried everything. We’ve tried to keep it current, keep it fun, and keep it interesting, and keep it innovative, and keep it changing, and keep it reflective of whatever is going on at the moment. (Levitt interview 2005b)

It was intended to teach ensemble playing, but often did so only superficially; whether because of its short duration, inconsistent leadership, or simply force of habit, innovations in musical arrangement were unusual, except as improvised by teachers in their individual performances.

In Second Half, there’s always people who have done it a hundred times already, and there’s a certain expectation of how it’s gonna go. [….] It’s more like a habit—you can say “I want this side of the room strum this way, and I want the people on this side of the room to do bass notes” and they’ll do it for five seconds and then slip back to what they were already doing. People just aren’t used to that kind of approach. The reason why that worries me is that my ultimate goal with teaching is to give people skills that they can take away and do things with. [….] If all people are learning is “follow the leader” then they’re not really getting that. (Leach interview 2005)
Originally, under Frank Hamilton, Second Half had also served as a forum for musical exchange, and continued to do so off and on over the years.

Used to be, Second Half, guests would show up, almost every night or something—’course it only happened twice a week, but there’d be somebody there, somebody would come in and do a song. Ray Tate knew lots of musicians and musicians would come in to show off their wares to him and wanted to do a song, and say, “Oh, can I play a song?” “Oh, yeah! Come on up, do a song!” […] Some people would engage the “congregation” and other people would just, you know, “I got a gig at the Earl on Friday, so here I am.” And we’ve tried to get people to do that occasionally, but it doesn’t happen a lot now. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

I can recall only two instances of guests performing at Second Half: Michael Miles played once to announce his forthcoming CD release show, and a visiting singer-songwriter from Britain stopped in to sing a song. Both times, because they were unfamiliar turns of events, it seemed to me people were uncertain how to react, though the general response was positive. Most nights, Second Half was a very predictable half hour.

But the biggest and most contentious issue, the one that has received the most attention and inspired the most debate, is Second Half’s lack of diversity—instrumental, stylistic, ethnic. Graduation festivities notwithstanding, Second Half was fundamentally a guitar affair; it was developed as such, and though other instruments have at times been incorporated, to varying degrees of success, it had always been unambiguously guitar-dominated. “Second Half to me is disappointing,” fiddle teacher Paul Tyler stated. Ari Frede described it as “a great big guitar engine in here. It’s a wall of sound. If you stand up in the balcony and watch them, you see all their arms moving together, like it’s a locomotive” (Frede interview 2005b). Although there have been times in the past when banjo students regularly participated, in 2005 Maddox’s mandolin and Skip’s harmonica classes were regularly appearing on Wednesdays, and Paul Tyler
had been known to integrate certain fiddle classes from time to time, the vast majority of participants played guitar, and most nights of the week, no other instruments were represented.

“I’ve got more guitar meetings about this and more discussions than *anything,*” Tomasello told me. In recent years there seem to have been two crests to the debate, one in the late 1990s, and one a couple of years before my fieldwork. I asked Tomasello what attitudes people had towards Second Half diversity. “There is a shitload of attitudes about that. Yeah. I have emails kept from years ago about that. And arguments and print-outs and long letters. Yeah. Diatribes that people have offered about that” (Tomasello interview 2005b). Paul Tyler, author of some of those letters, was one of the more vocal objectors to the status quo.

I raised a big stink a few years ago[….] Yeah, I think Second Half is a great idea, but it’s not being used for the good of all the students, the whole school[….] Well, it’s controlled by the Guitar Program, and it’s got its own little traditions that go way, way back to when the Old Town School was largely a guitar program and not much else. We got the Songbook, we got the twinspin[….] Resources, screens, soundsystems, all this. And they do something that’s just totally, totally useless to fiddle or ukelele students. The way its run, there’s just no way for diversity. (P. Tyler interview 2005)

Tyler’s fundamental complaint then, was over unfair distribution of resources. Simply scooting over on the bench for some fiddles was not sufficient, in his view. “You know, you can bring a class in there that’s not guitar, and get a little something, crumb thrown your way, but there’s no ownership.” He was concerned with more than just instrumental diversity, and argued for the inclusion of multi-ethnic songs, as well. “We have more Latino students in classes—if we’re doing a songbook, or we’re gonna put stuff on the overhead projector, let’s make sure we have some good Latino songs that everybody then could be taught to play and sing along with” (*ibid.*).

Jimmy Tomasello, on the other hand, felt that Second Half was legitimately part of the Guitar Program specifically, though he welcomed all comers. “It’s not exclusive, I think. The doors are always open. And have always *been* open. But ultimately, it’s the guitar students that
*built* this house, it’s the Guitar Program that essentially *was* the School, from get-go. And it’s like, well, this is the tradition that they’ve held on” (Tomasello interview 2005b). Welcoming or not, it does not appear that the guitar faculty was actively inviting others to participate before these debates arose. “I didn’t even know about Second Half until three or four years ago, sometime after we came over here,” Skip Landt admitted. That Landt, a harmonica teacher at the Old Town School since the mid-1980s and a student since 1979, active in the broader School the community for most of that time, could make such a claim certainly suggests that the Guitar Program was making little effort at outreach. “I’d never heard of it because the harmonicas never participated. It was only when Ari said ‘We have this thing called Second Half, would you like to be part of it?’ and I said ‘Sure.’ So now I love to do it” (Landt interview 2005).

Ari Frede, still relatively new in his position during the first wave of this debate, optimistically and proactively reached out to non-guitar teachers to encourage them to join Second Half. Graduation, of course, was easier to integrate, as a sequential performance where each class retained complete control over its own set. “So I started bringing in dance graduations, and some of the other people when they could. And that’s still there. We’re a minority. I would say there are probably fewer of any given department that I manage, there’s probably a smaller percentage of those classes that graduate on the stage than the percentage of guitar classes that graduate on the stage” (Frede interview 2005b). Nonetheless, graduation remained an integrated affair after those efforts.

Bringing new people into the purely participatory aspects of Second Half was much more difficult and Frede was consistently met with resistance from non-guitar teachers; it took Frede a long time to understand why. He gave me the examples of fiddle and ukulele, both of which were taught within specific traditions at OTSFM. In the fiddle program, after level three,
students chose between Cajun, Irish, Mexican, Old Time, and Early Country; and ukulele, of course, was Hawaiian. Students would learn the harmonies and rhythms most appropriate to those styles and repertoires. “If you bring those two people in here, and then you throw a Gordon Lightfoot song up there, and they’re shouting, ‘Go to B7!’ […] then they’re faced with a conundrum.” Ukulele students would have no reason to know B7 and fiddle students, of course, do not learn harmonies.

A creative student might try to find the tonic. Or something that harmonizes. And try to figure out some way to play along. That’ll be a challenge for a couple of minutes. And then it’s just gonna be a drag. ‘Cause if they find it, that’s all they can do[…] If they don’t find it, they’re just gonna be frustrated and there’s nobody up there who’s representing their instruments, they’re not even getting the oral input to be able to figure it out. More or less the same thing for ukulele or anything else. Don’t even ask me to bring in a West African djembe player here. (ibid.)

Even within Anglo-American traditions, there are barriers to participation for fiddles, banjos and mandolins, each of which has their own characteristic rhythmic approach. Maddox observed, “You have to be a fairly advanced banjo or fiddle player to fit into a generic folk musical environment like that, and come outside of whatever little traditional shell you’re working on. It requires—you have to be better than everybody else… [laughs].” Mandolin students start by learning to play melodies and chords strictly on the offbeat. Fiddles start with melody only. “It’s rhythm too, but I can’t get people to do that till Fiddle 3. You can’t just put somebody there in with the chord chart and say ‘go!’ because it’s different. You have to be a more wholly formed player before you can do that. The results can be really nice, but it’s not a beginning-level activity.” Maddox’s description of the musical environment as “generic” is key; guitar students did not explore different styles until the upper levels, and until then hover in a vague, folk-rock style for most songs, regardless of origin. “I think we thought that we could maybe stretch that, but as it turns out, nobody really teaches that kind of hillbilly rhythm in the
guitar department. Nobody really teaches how to separate between bass and treble” (Maddox interview 2005a).

Colby did, however, consistently bring his mandolin students to Second Half, teaching them to simply play on the offbeat of whatever the guitars were doing.

In my interview, Tomasello seemed unsympathetic to these limitations and exasperated by the complaints, apparently assuming a sort of general applicability in the consensus of repertoire and style the Guitar Program has arrived at.

I’m frickin’ sorry[...]. These songs are in the keys of the open fiddle strings. Somebody comes in occasionally and brings in a twin-spin song that has a few chords in it. That’s not reason to say, you know, you’re only thinking of guitarists. People just get outraged. It’s like, gahd. We’re talking five goddamn keys here, folks. And if you aren’t teaching your students to play in those keys, you aren’t making them musicians, you’re not teaching them music, you’re teaching them your repertoire[...]. Paul occasionally shows up. Whether his students come in, I don’t know. ‘Cause, see, they don’t learn to follow chord progressions. They learn...something else. They learn these melodies which are somehow independent of chord progressions, though God only knows how they could be [laughs]. If they’re music! Right? It’s like, they just...I don’t know why they can’t teach people to comp on their instruments. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Even though Second Half material is always sung, vocal students were unlikely to participate, for different practical reasons, as Elaine Moore explained.

I think I tried it once and I’ve seen it done many times and—no. I have never had any success. [...] And as far as getting them to come and sit and participate, they always wind up saying, “You know, it’s really for the guitar students.” And they’re right! [...] If I were sitting in there singing, I’d think, why am I sitting in here blowing out my voice in this cacophonous room? It’s a terrible singing situation. If you turned off the PA and got everybody in the middle of the room, facing each other, and the guitar players knew how to just hold back, then it would be a different story. That would be more of an acoustic sort of experience. The way we have it, I don’t think it’s any good. (E. Moore interview 2005b)

Skip Landt, in contrast, saw the incorporation of his harmonica students as an enjoyable challenge. “I don’t view it as an issue,” he said.

5 Actually this accompaniment pattern was covered by both Cathy Norden and Jimmy Tomasello in my Guitar 2 classes, but apparently was far from universal.
When Ari first suggested it, I wasn’t sure what I’d do. For a while I felt guilty because I didn’t feel like I was doing very well. And it still is not terribly interesting, but on the other hand, when you think of sitting there and playing three chords all the time, there’s not much difference between that and on the harmonica—there’re three different, two different places on the harmonica that you can find chords. [...] So, on the D harmonica you can play in D, A and G. [...] But if I can’t find anything else, I just look around for three notes that might be the key to the melody, or repeating pattern ... I’ll show them what those are. (Landt interview 2005)

Tomasello found these key limitations “understandable, because beginning students aren’t gonna hold on to six harps,” and was happy to advise teachers to accommodate Landt on Wednesday nights by favoring the keys a D harmonica can play in. (Tomasello interview 2005b).

After a while, the debate died down, with mandolin and harmonica better integrated. The issue had not been resolved, however.

A couple years ago the debate came up again and administrators were saying, *We should just get them in there [hand claps for emphasis].* We should just have them play. We don’t’ have enough diversity in there, we need to really assert ourselves and just *drag* people in there! And do it! And I talked about the old arguments again, they said, “We understand that! They should get up there! They should lead a song!” (Frede interview 2005b)

A new round of experimentation ensued, this time with the emphasis on diversifying the leadership of Second Half, in the hopes that that would help dilute the guitar bias. Colby Maddox, Paul Tyler and others were encouraged to present their own twin-spins; Tomasello also began assigning them to coordinate specific Second Halves on a regular basis—Maddox was assigned Friday morning, for example. “That was the final invitation for me, my realization that, OK, we’re gonna be ecumenical and open here” (Maddox interview 2005a). Meanwhile, in an effort to energize student participation and downplay the tendency of some teachers to turn Second Half into “a rock and roll show” (Tyler interview 2005), they experimented with asking specific *classes* to lead for a night, mostly Guitar 3 Rep classes, “but nobody bit” (Tomasello interview 2005b). The Second Half led by a class that I attended felt awkward.
The fundamental incompatibility of certain instrumental traditions did not seem to have been satisfactorily addressed, however. Realistically, how could a Hawaiian ukulele class be expected to integrate with a room full of guitars playing “Sweet Caroline” when both groups of students are beginners with a very small battery of skills to choose from? At some point, Tyler suggested providing alternate Second Halves: “Let’s let the specialty classes and these other instruments have a crack at the same resources and develop their own thing” (Tyler interview 2005). To the best of my knowledge, this has not been tried, though of course many smaller interest groups within the School organized their own drop-in musical activities: the Old Time Ensemble (which includes Tyler) hosts a monthly jam at First Fridays; Dvorak coordinated the Grafton Folk Club weekly; elementary bluegrass jams were held as Sunday workshops from time to time; students in the Irish music ensemble were taken out to an Irish seisiún; even Shamila Khetarpal, the bhangra dance teacher, would organize an outing to a local club for her students. But, of course, none of these events conveyed the same significance as Second Half, within the context of the institution and its history.

In the end, Ari Frede, who had started out promoting the inclusivity side of the debate, became sympathetic to the teachers who resisted trying to join Second Half; he felt that in the second round of the debate, the additional pressure he exerted on these teachers ultimately alienated them.

In fact, because we’re trying to protect these niche interests, I believe that one of them even believes that if I’m not a racist, I was promoting a racist ideology. Because by bringing in that class and that instrument and forcing them to play Gordon Lightfoot or whoever, I’m asking a minority group to get in step with a mainstream group. I don’t think I was either of those things. I was very clear what I was promoting, I was very clear how much faith I had in it, and that we should really just try it and see if we could figure out something that works, because we are workshopping Second Half, it is never, it’s not a set-in-stone product. But I do agree with the teacher’s statement as far as that being one model of assimilation. And I don’t think that was a healthy thing, I don’t think it
was a healthy way to go about it. I think a lot of that is really square peg in a round hole. And really messes with things that people hold extremely dear to them. (Frede interview 2005b)

In light of how much effort Frede and others at the School put into finding qualified musicians to teach different traditions, and into listening to those teachers and respecting their commitments to their musical heritage, he regretted how it had turned out. “They come here with all this trust: I’m going to get to pass this on to other students. And then we ask them to lose it when they come in here [Second Half]. That’s…that’s not right” (Frede interview 2005b).

There were no easy answers. Should Second Half be a musical meeting ground for everyone at the Old Town School and return to the heart of the community? Was that remotely possible any more? If it remained explicitly a component of the Guitar Program, would it be seen as an exclusionary entitlement of the mainstream? Would any kind of a compromise inevitably require the acquiescence of the minority groups to the norms of the majority—who, not incidentally, also represented the dominant demographic in American society at large, skewing white and male? By 2005, the dust these big questions had raised had already settled, though it “left a bad taste in people’s mouths” that still lingered, as was immediately clear to me in conversations with teachers. “But typical to how things work here, it required that somebody stand up and make a stink about it” (Maddox interview 2005a).

Conclusion

Among the myriad goals that motivated students to take up the guitar or another instrument at the Old Town School, the two most fundamental were to meet people and to learn some music. The basic guitar classes turned out not to be ideal for the former; neither Peter Moore, Alex Todd nor Bjorn Krane had yet made any friends at OTSFM when I interviewed
them. Krane cited his and others’ busy schedules as a hindrance: “I’ve met a lot of people through the various classes, but I’ve never—one class, after the end of the class, we met for drinks, but because often times people go to different weeknights’ classes, it’s hard to keep in contact[….] Not that I’m opposed to it, just that I haven’t” (Krane interview 2005). Though Cindy Rotondo did meet her boyfriend at the School she had not made many other friends. “I was hoping coming here would help me to build on that community. I really haven’t found that as much, because there is that sense of it’s still sort of a school, you kind of come and go every eight weeks. There still isn’t that ability to draw everybody in as much” (Rotondo interview 2005). In my case, I felt much less camaraderie with other students in my guitar classes than in my ensemble or vocal classes; still struggling to learn the basics and unable to play by feel or memory yet, it seemed that students’ eyes were often on their fingers or music stands rather than each other. Only on the last day of Guitar 2 Rep, while rehearsing our graduation performance on our own (Jimmy was elsewhere setting up), did I feel the sense of a group bond emerge. Intangible variables like group chemistry, individual personality and, of course, luck, seemed to affect whether or not students could overcome the limited classroom context in which they meet to build real friendships. Still, the music mattered, as itself a social interaction.

It’s great to be out, and—even if you don’t get to know the people around you, you are relating with them during class. So, even if it’s a matter of you don’t say a word when you walk in and you play, and don’t say anything when you leave, there is that sense of connection when you’re playing. (Rotondo interview 2005)

It was often in the ensemble classes, where students would play together for several sessions, or even years, united by common musical goals and tastes, that the stronger relationships were forged through music. This is the topic of the next chapter.

The Old Town School offered a safe, inclusive, non-threatening environment to learn the basic skills that enable one to join a “real-world” participatory scene later. Skip Landt went so
far as to tell his students that OTSFM was not a school; “it’s a portal into this folk community. Which is not as much a community of people who know each other as it’s the kind of invisible community of people who make music in their living rooms and bathroom and cars as they’re driving. The school is only one of those portals, but it happens to be a very big one” (Landt interview 2005). Without the School providing that intermediary step between the musical life of a listener and that of a musician, many adults would not dare take the plunge, or know where to begin.

Hey, ultimately it’s just, how’re these people learning music, and is the curriculum...the core of the curriculum, is it built towards demystifying music, or is it built towards making it a separate sort of thing? [...] My position is demystify. Music is just another expression, like laughing or crying. You know? You just come to be able to do that. There’s no way that the Old Town School is trying to turn out professionals. We’re not, you know, Berkelee. We’re not G.I.T. or any of that kind of crap. This is something for people to do with their free time. And just enhance their lives in some way. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

If folk music is just music made by “folks,” as many at the Old Town School believe, then these classes offered the most fundamental folk music education. Maddox argued,

In practice, what we end up with is something that’s definitely a folk music organization because we’re teaching people that music does matter enough. Sometimes it only matters so that you can get into the pants of the person sitting next to you in class [laughs]. [...] But we’re definitely giving music a big chunk of attention. We’re saying, “This matters.” We say why it matters—we’re making that case, that if you’re gonna really enjoy yourself, if you’re gonna really participate, then you have to know these skills, here’s the whole array of skills you need to get on board and start participating. Not that these are the skills you need to be, like, an incredible musician—this is what you need to really get a taste of this. We make a point that it’s really important to get a taste of this. We have to make that case, because it doesn’t make itself. [laughs]. (Maddox interview 2005b)

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6 Guitar Institute of Technology, now renamed Musicians Institute College of Contemporary Music.
CHAPTER 8

MUSICAL CLANS, MUSICAL FRIENDSHIPS I:
PARTICIPATORY PURITY IN THE SPONTANEOUS FOLK ENSEMBLE CLAN

Introduction

Foremost is...in general terms, is my ability to be part of the community that makes music. I...don’t take that for granted. That’s the first thing. All the rest of that is gravy on the potatoes. It’s great, it’s important and it’s fun, but the truth is that the best thing that’s happened is that I’ve met wonderful people and we’ve gotten together to make music in a pleasant, non-competitive, let’s-how-we-can-do kind of situation. (Mann interview 2005)

Michael Mann came to the Old Town School to revive the rusty skills of his youth with a few guitar classes; he soon joined the Beatles Ensemble, and from there began exploring other rock ensembles. Music, and the friendships he made through music, moved to the center of life—he has even become a guitar teacher himself, as of 2010. Could he have found this pathway without the entry point of first the School and then the Beatles Ensemble?

“I have to say that taking the individual classes for the actual instruments is fun, but when the real fun comes is when you get in ensembles. […] And you start playing with people. That is when it all comes together. For me” (Donovan and Shriver interview 2005). As student Ellen Shriver discovered, the Old Town School’s ensemble classes were where the basic skills learned in the guitar core curriculum and other instrument-specific classes were put into play in the creation of real music—and real relationships. Joining an ensemble is the most direct way into a musical community within the Old Town School. This chapter and the following one tell the stories of two contrasting examples from among the School’s many “clans”: one a loose constellation of flexibly traditionalist musicians who privileged participatory music making, emerging from Mark Dvorak’s Spontaneous Folk Ensemble (SFE) class and related groups; and the other rooted in Steve Levitt’s Beatles Ensemble, the Old Town School’s largest and longest
running ensemble class, which faithfully performed the entire recorded oeuvre of the Beatles, and whose members also circulated through other rock- and pop-based ensemble classes. Both were far more than just classes that one enrolls in for eight weeks (though there is no requirement to commit to more than that); rather, joining these classes could become the core experience initiating one into a network of friends and acquaintances—what Steve Levitt calls a “clan”—whose varied music and social activities owed a clear debt to the basic approach and aesthetic of the original ensemble class(es) and their teachers.

The Old Town School has offered a large and ever-evolving roster of ensemble classes alongside the single-instrument classes described in the last chapter for many years. While it is extremely unlikely that OTSFM students had never played in multi-instrument groupings prior to the 1980s, ensemble classes as a category did not come into their own until Michael Miles’ tenure as program director. Concerned by core guitar curriculum’s failure to retain students after they had mastered basic skills, Miles encouraged teachers to experiment with ensemble classes that would appeal to a new generation of students and made a place for them in the overall curriculum.

I thought, there’s probably really good players who would like to play with other people, so I created this thing called the Blues School. It doesn’t exist any more in the form that it did, but it was going to be electric blues, I was going to have Chicago blues players that were teaching it[….T]he idea was that it would be an ensemble. You know, instead of a class of fifteen guitar players, it was gonna be drums, bass, harmonica, a couple guitars, saxophone, singer, whatever. And we’d take whoever signed up and not audition them per se, but interview them and place them in appropriate ensembles with other students. And they would work together for the eight weeks with the idea that there were always, from day one they were preparing for this performance that would be at Buddy Guy’s or Blues, Etc. (Miles interview 2005a)

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1 The Blues School did still exist in some form, however, and was sometimes referred to by that name in conversation; in the 2005 catalogs, it was listed as the Electric Blues Ensemble. But the practice of auditioning students to sort them into the appropriate combos—apparently unique
By 2005, there were around thirty such classes offered in the course catalog, covering a broad range of styles and traditions, with varying entrance criteria (though students were self-selecting and almost none required auditions). It was therefore unrealistic for me to attempt a survey of these offerings, and I chose instead to focus on these two clans. I enrolled in the Mark Dvorak’s Spontaneous Folk Ensemble for one session in the fall of 2004 (continuing to drop in from time to time over the following year), Arlo Leach’s Jug Band Ensemble for one session in the summer of 2005, and Steve Levitt’s Beatles Ensemble for two sessions in the spring and summer of 2005, while frequenting the Grafton Folk Club intermittently throughout 2005. Throughout this period and beyond, I became friendly with members of all four groups and tried to follow their activities, formal and informal.

As I gathered the material for this chapter and reviewed the relevant interviews, I realized that its central teaching figures, Mark Dvorak and Steve Levitt, are both philosophers and remarkably careful, articulate observers of the ways that people interact and learn. Perhaps that’s why I was drawn to their groups in the first place. Both are quiet, thoughtful people, who take care to guide rather than dominate their classes, but who radiate a certain charisma that attracts a dedicated student following. Both have developed great sensitivity to the many ways that students learn and convey to them a reassuring patience. And, quite simply, people like them because of their generous souls. At the same time, both are accomplished performers who clearly enjoy being on stage, and do not hesitate to draw attention to themselves when it doesn’t inhibit student learning, or when performing professionally. Because of their long experience and intellectual curiosity, the fundamental philosophies for music making and for learning in among ensemble classes—and the tradition of performing at Buddy Guy’s Legends or other blues clubs at the end of the session was still intact.
both clans is especially clear and well understood, and therefore well integrated with the social relationships, the bonds of love and friendship that grow amongst clan members.

**Musical Friendships and Clans**

These chapters are about the meaningful personal relationships—some casual, some lifelong—that happen musically, in the act of making music together. The English language does not seem to have a term for this, in either colloquial or academic discourse. Those we work with are our colleagues; those we study with are our classmates; those we fight alongside are our comrades; who are those we play music with, in long-term, affective relationships? We do have terms to describe specific kinds of musical relationships—bandmates, conductor and orchestra, guru and student, duet partners, etc.—but unlike the non-musical relationships I listed above, none carry the connotation of a strong affective relationship developed *through* engaging music together—i.e., a *friendship*.

But anyone who has played music with others for fun (whether or not it was also for other reasons) and found that their affection for the others in the group cannot be disentangled from their affection for the music knows this kind of relationship. As the cases that follow demonstrate, relationships can be initiated with and continue to be fundamentally constituted of *musical* interactions, though they nearly always extend into other areas of social life over time. They are undoubtedly as emotionally deep as more verbally constituted friendships—often much more so, as many of the people in this chapter would attest. For lack of a catchier coinage, I will simply refer to such relationships here as “musical friendships.”

Musical friendships begin with a common enjoyment of music, of course, and the Old Town School excels above all else at providing easy access to exploring that enjoyment and the
opportunity to meet others who share it. As we saw in the last chapter, for many OTSFM students, it may not go any farther than that, and a few sessions of basic guitar classes satisfy their urge. For those in these chapters, however, the next step becomes commitment to a group, and here the right blend of social and musical involvement can propel someone into a musical life s/he never anticipated.

Sallie Gaines is an example of someone for whom the emergence of music at the center of her social life was truly a surprise. Despite her innate love of music, her interest in playing was thwarted as a child by her difficulty in learning to read music. Not until she was approaching middle age, and at the persistent urging of her friends, Neil Donovan and Ellen Shriver, did she and her husband (with the aid of a little alcohol) finally agree to take a class at the Old Town School. Within a few short months she had joined in the Jug Band Ensemble, was swept up in the group’s enthusiasm and found herself committing indefinitely to performing with a band of new musical friends.

It’s not easy to think of not doing it. This to me has the…impact…of …like being on a board. This is something that I do outside of work that requires commitment. And even though I took just classes for two sessions [before joining the Jug Band], you know, you would come, you would do your thing, you would learn, you would sing with the other people. […] But no one else would do poorly because of my not being present. Elaine [Moore] was going to be paid whether I showed up or not. This class is a commitment. And that’s mostly because of the performance, but not entirely. […] So it’s become a bigger part of my life, but I appreciate it for that, because I work really hard. I’ve got a demanding job, I travel, I’ve got crazy clients, and to have something that is so removed from my real life, like this, that I get such enjoyment out of, is not something I could give up lightly […] I cannot see myself stopping to do this in the near future. (Gaines interview 2005)

It is easy to observe, after spending some time at the Old Town School, that a lot of the same people turn up in the same ensemble classes, session after session, and that a lot of these regulars will also cross over into certain other, related ensembles. In Chapter 1, I introduced
Ruth Finnegan’s “pathways” as one frame for understanding how the musical lives of individuals intersect with musical collectives in a contemporary urban environment. Here, I add Tom Turino’s “cultural cohorts” and, focusing in on the Old Town School and the circles of friends that populate certain, related ensemble classes, add Steve Levitt’s “clans.” Finnegan arrived at her “pathways” metaphor in dissatisfaction with the concept of “community”—or other localized, holistic concepts—to explain part-time, geographically scattered nature of amateur urban music-making.

These local musical pathways were established, already-trodden and, for the most part, abiding routes which many people had taken and were taking in company with others. To be sure, none were permanent in the sense of being changeless, nor could they survive without people treading and constantly re-forming them; new paths were hewn out[...] But for any given individuals, the established pathways were in a sense already there, as a route at least to begin on. (Finnegan 2007 [1989], 306-307)

This is a very accurate description of the role played by clans within the School and by the School overall within the context of Chicago’s North Side: keeping those pathways open and accessible to newcomers. Many, if not most of the individuals featured in this chapter would have been unlikely to find musical friendship without the existence of these pathways.

Turino’s cultural cohort concept similarly addresses the partial nature of musical pursuits at the Old Town School without undervaluing their significance. Cultural cohorts share certain habits and values based on “parts of the self”—such as generation, class, or musical taste—and, especially where they represent an oppositional or contrastive stance to the broader cultural formation (such as enjoying participatory music in a consumerist society), can offer opportunities for part-time departures from the norm (Turino 2008, 111, 227). The Old Town School creates an environment for just such cohort creation and maintenance. While the School itself is a cohort for some—for those who feel integrated within its overall ethos and history (as
do many of the long-term teaching and administrative staff profiled in the previous chapters)—for most, it is the cohorts within the cohort that have more meaning. The Old Town School harbors cohorts within cohorts within cohorts. Given the fluidity of boundaries encouraged by the general welcoming attitude of inclusivity (a characteristic of the OTSF cohort overall), it may be a little artificial to draw lines and hierarchies between the various social subgroups there. Membership to any of these mini-cohorts can be as fleeting or as permanent as the members desire—it is, in fact, desire alone (or, less dramatically, preference) that keeps individuals aligned more with one group than another.

From years of close observation, Steve Levitt settled on the term “clan” to describe the musical collectives he has seen coalesce and dissipate.

[Clans] are not rigid forms. They’re living things and they spin things off and they coalesce and they absorb things and they throw this off and it’s a fairly dynamic process, rather than a process of sedimentation. You don’t see that at all—these clans are like volcanoes. But they seem constant because of something else. So people are constantly coming in and leaving, and the size of the clan—if you look at, sort of stays the same. But the living features of it, living inside it changes. And there are times when there are mixes there, the right mix of males and females, of people doing an instrument, or people who know how to…take a clan to the next step. That know how to put together a picnic or an event or play something. Or just know how to be with each other. And then it grows. (Levitt interview 2005b)

Partly, of course, they are drawn together by musical taste, which also tends to correlate with other lifestyle choices. But mundane logistics, like weekly schedules or geography, also factor in to which people constitute a clan.

There’s a 909 clan that loves the 909 [Armitage Ave.] building, and they kind of hang out there. ‘Cause they live there and they can walk to there, and they took their kids there and they were there when they were kids, and it’s kind of that sort of thing. So there’s a neighborhood clan around the old 909 building. There are clans, there are sort of things arranged around nights, ‘cause people tend to be able to do, like Monday nights. So there’s a Monday night proto-thing, you’ll see those people together. And depending on the particular mix of people there, that blends strongly, I mean that binds strongly or doesn’t. (Levitt interview 2005b)
Levitt even runs one ensemble for that Monday-night clan, which cycles through various rock albums, on the basis of its schedule; they call it the Lunar Rock Ensemble. If the chemistry is there, these external factors facilitate musical blending, which organically become personal connections and extend into the musicians’ social lives.

All of it depends on the personal qualities and actions of specific individuals, however.

And if that sort of falls away, then a clan has largely—the queen of a particular clan, for example, had to move to California to be with her family. And the clan was unable to sustain. She’s not the best musician, she was not best the singer, she never in any way made herself the leader of anything—and yet, she was. And we all knew she was the queen of that clan. She didn’t want to leave, and just had to. I know that she would have liked for things to stay together, but it just couldn’t be with[ou]t her. So oddly enough it comes down to very special people that we do not really know what they do[….] And where they go, success reigns. And when they leave, it is difficult to figure out what it is that was taken away. (Levitt interview 2005b.)

I would consider Polly Parnell to be one of these lynchpin individuals for the Spontaneous Folk Clan. I very much doubt anyone would have referred to her as a “queen” (least of all herself), but she contributed a vital presence and a head full of social and musical knowledge to the clan. Parnell moved to Chicago around 2002, three years before I met her, in middle age, after living most of her life in rural Pennsylvania. Sensible economic reasons motivated her to bring her teenaged son to Chicago where her grown daughter had already lived for several years. Her daughter had taken some classes at the Old Town School.

And she was always telling me, I’m taking this class at Old Town School, I’m taking that class at Old Town School. And I was so jealous! ‘Cause we didn’t have anything like that, you know? I thought everyone in the world had forgotten about folk songs. So when I came here to Chicago, the first thing I wanted to do, because she was kind of located on the North Side, was to take a class at Old Town School. I wanted to take a class. (Parnell interview 2005)

Polly had been a semi-professional musician at when she was younger and was no newcomer to folk music. She was exposed to the Kingston Trio and “the folksong rage” in her
early teens through her brother, who was several years older and in college. “And it just spoke to my heart, I don’t know why.” She had already been studying piano, and was recognized at school for her good singing voice, but now she picked up the guitar and threw herself into folk music. Then, the summer she was sixteen, her brother took her to the Jersey Shore for the summer, where they performed at bars up and down the seashore as a folk duo. “Well that was the best summer of my life! No supervision, running all over the seashore in New Jersey, being sixteen, going out in a bar and playing Irish folk songs. And everybody, ‘Can I buy this little girl a beer?’ Oh yeah” (Parnell interview 2005). Only after these formative musical experiences did she realize that her own family was part of the musical traditions she and her peers were embracing.

I come from a family of I guess I call them closet folksingers because they would never call themselves folksingers. I mean, my grandmother started singing old Irish song […] when I was about fourteen and I got all excited. I said, “Grandma, you know folksongs!” She said, “Oh, those aren’t folksongs. Those are just songs people used to sing.” And I had a brother in college and he brought his little folk group back for one of our family reunions on the fourth of July. And my uncle Bill and my dad were there and my uncle Bill says to dad, “Harry, pick up that banjo and we’ll show ‘em what we can do!” And he picked up one of those fiddles and my dad picked up the banjo and started to play you know, not bluegrass, but old time music? And I never even knew he could play! I never knew my uncle Bill could play! And then I found out that they had bummed around on trains during the Depression and made their living right out of high school when they were younger doing that. So I guess I do come from a family of folk tradition, but I never knew it! (Parnell interview 2005)

She soon went to college herself, got married, and became deeply involved in the anti-war movement in Pittsburgh, which was for her thoroughly integrated with her folk music activities. Tragically, her husband died in Vietnam, and with two children to care for, Polly eventually returned to her hometown. She settled down and became a nurse, but still played and sang for her children, and played children’s gigs, too. Once her children got to a certain age, they lost interest “and it just kind of fell away, you know? I just kind of fell away. And I didn’t
pick it up again until actually I came here. I went many years without singing anything” (Parnell interview 2005).

In her new Chicago life, she had embraced folk music again, and her whole social life revolved around it at the time of our interview—she even lived and worked in the neighborhood (see Chapter 2). “I just loved it, you know, I just felt all revived because I heard folksongs again, you know? Without having to go get ‘em at a garage sale or something. So it was just really wonderful.” She took Irish singing, private voice lessons, Women’s Choir, Harry Smith Anthology, American Songbag, Sea Shanties, Guitar 2 Rep, Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, and Jug Band Ensemble (to name only a few), and regularly attended First Fridays, Second Half and the Grafton Folk Club. She also got her son involved in the Teen Rock Ensemble.

A naturally outgoing woman, Polly soon began making friends. By opening her home to OTSFM friends on a regular basis, she surely became someone through whom other people met new friends. When she met Ellen Shriver, who was playing a similar role among her own friends, the social synergy around them must have crackled; perhaps this is why the Jug Band became so successful so quickly. Ellen and her husband Neil Donovan came to the Old Town School just to take a few classes.

ES: What we found, too, which we weren’t prepared for, is that we thought we would just take classes. What you really do is, you join a community. It’s much more than just taking classes.

ND: Yeah. Yeah, I thought, you come, spend an hour and a half…

ES: [overlapping] You’re in, you’re out.

ND: …go practice, come back, spend an hour and half, but it’s become a big part of our social life. […] You know Polly has these wild parties [ES laughs] that are all based on music. But we’ve also gone over there just strictly for doing music. And we’re in September going off on a canal boat—trip on the Erie Canal with Mark and Sallie, and the whole—aside from the vacation part, we’re all taking instruments, so we’re gonna learn Erie Canal songs. You know, just that
kind of thing. But you know, we go over to their house and we’ll drag our instruments, or they’ll come over to our place or whatever. Yeah. (Donovan and Shriver interview 2005)

Clans with Participatory Priorities

The two ensemble-based clans I’ve chosen to focus on in these chapters represent opposite ends of the participatory/presentational spectrum, threaded through with myriad complications and compromises; this chapter focuses on those with the strongest participatory emphasis. Guitar teacher Mark Dvorak had been teaching the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble (SFE) for several years by 2005 and had begun hosting a biweekly gathering at the Grafton pub next door to the Old Town School organized on the same principles, providing an aural learning environment, emphasizing ensemble skills. The groups’ central concern was learning how to listen and respond musically to what one hears, in the moment, without prior rehearsal. Three of his SFE students began meeting every Tuesday night in the lobby of the School to play, forming their own informal group under name the “Pickin’ Bubs,” around which another, closely related social cluster had developed. And Arlo Leach, another former SFE student who soon joined the faculty, took many of his cues from Dvorak in forming his own Jug Band Ensemble, some of the members of which were also veterans of the SFE or participants in the Grafton Folk Club; this group, however, became a dynamic performing group remarkably soon after forming, breaking away from the purely participatory intent of Dvorak’s groups.

As these ensembles took shape, they tended to fall into a couple of large categories, mappable on Turino’s participatory-to-presentational spectrum, with correspondingly distinct preferences for the appropriate source of their musical material; those at the participatory end favored the oral tradition, though readily using recordings as an archive to draw from as a learning tool, and did not tend to perform for anyone but each other, while those at the
presentational end placed a high premium on public performance and drew not only their material but their inspiration from commercial records, studio-produced and mass-mediated. No OTSFM ensembles that I know of would use recording as an outlet for their own performance (except as a personal keepsake), and, of course, with the exception of an occasional and short-lived classical group (e.g., at one point, a flute choir was offered), none took written music as their primary source. All ensembles did work within at least three of the modes in some way (studio art recording is usually irrelevant to the more participatory ones), often navigating complex negotiations amongst them.

Those ensembles that emphasized a participatory mode of music-making were more directly descended from the Old Town School of the 1950s and 1960s and remained very much within the parameters of the School’s traditional mission. Those at the far end of the continuum, like the Old Time Ensemble (OTE) and the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble (SFE), eschewed public performance so completely that other students would not usually see them on stage even at a graduation or First Friday.

Paul Tyler, recently arrived from Bloomington, Indiana, where he had been active in the old-time music and dance community since 1978 (Bealle 2005, 186), took over the Old Time Ensemble in 1990 after it had been running a few years. “I walk in Monday morning, first day of work in the year, and Mike Miles says, ‘By the way, you’re going to teach Old Time Ensemble.’ I said, ‘I am? I don’t know what to do with that.’ Fifteen years later and I’m still teaching it […] most of my Wednesday nights have been dedicated to the old-time ensemble, ever since January of 1990” (Tyler interview 2005). Particularly attractive to fiddle and banjo players, who had fewer genres to explore than guitar players (“We had to get a guitar student to be a volunteer. And they’d volunteer points for being the guitar player in the Old Time Ensemble” [ibid.]), it
quickly grew, enrolling twenty to thirty people by the mid-1990s. As Walenia Silva observed in her 2003 fieldwork, Tyler and his co-teacher, Steve Rosen, emphasized learning tunes by memory and practicing them independently in breakout groups of four or five, encouraging collective decision-making independent from the teachers, who then served more of a coaching role (Silva 2007, 132-134). This taught students musical social skills that could be applied in other Old Time settings outside the School.

The OTE soon became a clan. There were students who would enroll in the ensemble for “five, six, seven years, who wouldn’t miss a session,” and close relationships grew among them; Paul Tyler met his wife Gail through the group, and when their first child was born “Old Time Ensemble got like the fourth phone call announcing the birth. Called family and then another friend and then we called the Old Town School” (P. Tyler interview 2005). The clan surrounding the Old Time Ensemble linked up with musical activities outside of the School as well; Janet Sayre, who played banjo and fiddle with the group for about three years, also became involved with dance: “There was also a whole barn dance phase of my life which isn’t here, but that was people all playing at the dance, at the Bethany Church now. And some of the same people that do the barn dance, that we do here on Fridays, it’s the same community, overlaps. The musicians are all overlapped” (Sayre interview 2005).

Paul Tyler also started an Early Country Ensemble in the mid-1990s, focusing on the guitar styles of the Carter Family and expanding to the music of other country musicians of the 1930s and 1940s (i.e., what was then marketed as “hillbilly music”). While this ensemble did use commercial records as its source material, it retained a participatory emphasis and was not known as a performing ensemble—though it did generate spin-off groups that were.

By 1999 it boomed. It caught. Within that first year of the move over here it was just mushrooming. All of the sudden specialty classes became much bigger. Much
bigger pot to draw from. The early country ensemble took off[....] But it took off and got to be gigantic[....] In that first year or so over here we might have 30 people, and fully a fifth of them would be named Dave. So we had the era of the Daves. Again, there’s been a couple of weddings that have come out of that. There’s been a couple of relationships that flowered then fell apart, all sorts of stuff. A wave of students went through it. (P. Tyler interview 2005)

After a few years, the Early Country Ensemble’s moment passed, probably due to a combination of changing popular tastes and a new teacher’s decision to redefine it somewhat. Tyler accepts the ebb and flow of the ensemble clans around him. “It goes in waves[....] Because you get a bunch of people in it for four or five sessions in a row, and they meet. They move on for various reasons and then you gotta build it up again[....] I have my little kingdom here and I rule it as...protect it. (ibid.)

Meanwhile, an entirely different sort of ensemble was flourishing: ensemble classes based on rock and other popular music. The history and development of these groups will be covered in Chapter 9.

**The Spontaneous Folk Clan**

*The Spontaneous Folk Ensemble*

The group meets in the gallery, a large room on the south end of the ground floor, big enough to be a small dance studio, though apparently it never is (no mirrors). There’s a homey oriental carpet on the floor, bare brick walls, windows on two sides looking out the back of the building, and, yes, it’s a gallery. The exhibit this fall is a retrospective of thirteen years of Quimby’s, an alternative and ‘zine press in Chicago.

There are ten or so students in the class, slightly more women than men. About half play guitar, one woman plays banjo, three women play fiddle, and one woman alternates between guitar and tin whistle (the latter she is just beginning to learn, I think). No one plays at an advanced level.

[....The last song of the night was]“The Storms Are On the Ocean” (Carter Family). I really like that song, so I enjoyed that. I was able to pick out the harmonies quite quickly—I’ve definitely improved at this. After once or twice
through, Mark showed us how to imitate the autoharp on the guitar (he had showed us the same thing the week before, without the autoharp reference)—strumming 3-string chords at the ninth and tenth fret. We also took a whirl at the melody on the low strings, but didn’t spend too much time at it. The goal was clearly to get some guitars playing bass and rhythm, some playing “autoharp,” and taking some turn at the melody alternating with the melody instruments. There was a little soloing—the banjo took a solo. (Fieldnotes for November 2, 2004)

The Spontaneous Folk Ensemble (SFE) was started by guitar teacher Mark Dvorak around 1998, directly inspired by Frank Hamilton’s teaching style. The goal of the class was to teach students at any level of technical proficiency (though in practice most are at a fairly basic level) to improvise group arrangements, and thus, to create an enjoyable, collective music making experience. “Explore the art of creating spontaneous group arrangements,” read the course catalog description from 2001 to 2006, “Mark emphasizes the songs of the American tradition as a means of learning to listen and to work well with other musicians. No songbooks. No handouts. Just great music.” Unlike other classes I attended or knew of where the teachers only encouraged students not to read from the song sheets, Dvorak actually committed everyone to the principle; I do not ever recall seeing a sheet of paper appear in an SFE class. Everything was taught and learned by ear, and simple and familiar songs that could be learned quickly and remembered easily were favored to keep the focus on exploring different ways to vary accompaniment and elaborate on melodies and harmonies, often instrument-specific. Dvorak explicitly defined folk music as “participatory music.”

He always talks in some way about what folk music is, and tonight he made it very specific, as the difference between performance and participatory music (he did use those terms). As examples he drew from within the OTSF—comparing the flamenco or kids ballet classes with their carefully practiced routines, with just asking someone to waltz (and the demurrals you’re likely to get from people who learn routines). (Fieldnotes, November 30, 2004)
In terms of style and repertoire, SFE maintained clear parameters, limited mostly to old North American songs from the oral tradition, as well as some newer ones that sounded old, often with a nostalgic tinge. This consistency was maintained despite the fact that the majority of songs in any given class period were suggested by students rather than by the teacher. Familiarity was important and group favorites like “Goodnight Irene,” “When the Saints Go Marching In,” “Long Black Veil,” “Dink’s Song,” “Catfish John,” and “Going Down to Cairo” were chosen frequently. Arlo Leach, a formally trained musician playing semi-professionally while he was a student in the class, remembered the impact this approach made on him.

In his class it definitely was clear that it didn’t matter what you were playing, it was that you were playing with other people and creating an arrangement of a song. That was really great to see, that so many more people can participate when you take that approach. You don’t have to be a gifted lyricist or spend hours cranking out a couple verses and a chorus. You could just come in and play something out of the songbook or a song that you remembered from some other class, and everybody could join in. (Leach interview 2005)

The Spontaneous Folk Ensemble tended to have a natural social cohesion, successfully attracting like-minded musicians with very compatible musical tastes, who, in the course of a few sessions, would learn a very similar approach to playing, one where the collective experience and group sound was much more important than technical complexity or advancement. At the same time, its avoidance of the pop repertoire so common in the guitar curriculum and the seeming simplicity of the song choices likely deterred others from joining. Peggy Browning, Maura Lally and Mark Mitchell were three of the original members of the class when it started in the late 1990s, and were still playing together on a weekly basis when I met them in 2004.

Mark Mitchell: The thing that struck me is you could take a group of people—and everyone’s doing relatively simple stuff—and it would sound great together. As you move on in the guitar classes, it gets more and more—they start teaching more and more complicated and harder stuff. And here’s something you could
just take something you’ve mastered and play with other people and sound great doing it. [....]

Maura Lally: It was neat!

Peggy Browning: Yeah, it was just all of a sudden like have all these parts playing and then it would just come together in this beautiful sound like you’ve never—it’s just the most, it’s the neatest thing in the world to be a part of, you know.

(Browning, Lally and Mitchell interview 2005)

Mark Dvorak was one of the first teachers I got to know at the Old Town School, partly because he was one of the most visible—literally. In between classes and other commitments, Dvorak could often be found in the front lobby of the School, quietly playing his guitar by himself, or with others who sat down for a song as they passed through, or engaged in conversations about music. Although this sort of front lobby activity is part of what makes the Old Town School feel like a welcoming and vibrant environment, not many teachers would actually take the time to do it; Mark was a fixture. By 2004, Mark Dvorak had taught at the Old Town School for eighteen years straight and certainly ranked among the most respected senior teachers.

He first came to the School as a student in 1978 when he would have been about twenty-one, brought by a friend. “I had such a hard time picturing what it was. I’d heard about it.” But it certainly was not part of his world. Born in the western suburb of Cicero, Illinois, then a solidly white working-class town with a reputation for racism and political corruption, Dvorak came from a blue-collar family; when his father landed an office job after serving in the military, the family was proud he wouldn’t have to work in a plant. “We had a modest lifestyle. Which was fine. We were never without.” Dvorak’s ethnic heritage is neatly quartered into four of Chicago’s most significant immigrant groups: Irish, German, Jewish, and Czech (they pronounce “Dvorak” with an American “r,” not like the composer). “So I’m a mutt! [....] But we weren’t
an ethnic family, you know, we were an American family.” As with the immigrant grandparents of so many of the Chicagoans I interviewed, assimilation was the priority for Mark’s. When he was about nine, the family moved a little further out to what is now La Grange, Illinois, and, in fact, Dvorak has remained a suburbanite all his life; he has never lived in the city, or outside the Chicago area (Dvorak interview 2005).

He did not grow up in a particularly musical environment—he notes that two of his brothers did pick up guitar as teenagers and did quite well with it, but “you know how it is in school, they were hanging out with music guys; I was hanging out with the baseball guys. And never the twain meet.” Dvorak dreamed of a career in baseball.

Yeah, I went pretty far, but I wasn’t—I couldn’t cut it. But then, I had other interests. I remember...you know I didn’t have the athletic thing. I was always a good athlete, but there’s a whole mindset and a lifestyle, and the boys’d go off drinking beer and doing that, and I just wasn’t ready for all of that, you know. I like the game a great deal. I remember bringing a harmonica to the outfield [pantomimes; TL laughs] “Doodle-doot-doo.” I was blowing on the harmonica in the outfield and I got in trouble for it. And I look back on that and I say, “well, see, there you go.” (Dvorak interview 2005)

He did have the abortive experience with music lessons as a child so typical among the people I interviewed—“I took a violin class when I was a boy, and it was too hard. So I just stopped. And I didn’t like it”—but enjoyed singing in church. But as for musical activities in school, “Oh, goodness no! Playing ball!” Though they were not socially connected, the worlds of sports and music were not unrelated: “This was doing things. I just enjoyed doing it, being around the people who like to do things” (ibid.) After high school, Mark developed an interest in guitar.

I had a job working in a [chuckles] in a factory shipping department of a place called Musser. Musser Industries. And they were a division of Ludwig Drums. And they made marimbas. And xylophones. I worked in xylophone factory! And through the union, the same labor union for that company, was the same union for the—I think was called Ampeg Guitars and they made inexpensive
And it just happened to be when I was there, the ones where the decals were a little crooked, and they had a nick—they couldn’t sell them as new, well, they would sell them to the union people. And I got myself a guitar for $40. Brand new. And I thought, well I’ll take this home. And I thought that was a convenient excuse—well, it was cheap, you know, you have to justify everything. So I brought one home, and I practiced on that thing, I really did. I mean, at the time it was just interesting, I was curious about things—you know, young people are. And I would get up every morning and I had these little books, I was gonna teach myself. (Dvorak interview 2005)

Sidling into music this way, Dvorak soon found his way to the Old Town School. He took group guitar lessons there for less than a year from Mike Dunbar. “I just came by myself and I just was—I call them ‘lurkers’ now, people that just, they’re comfortable watching from a certain distance, and that was mostly me. I just thought everybody was so good” (Dvorak interview 2005). Shy and intimidated, he nonetheless drank it all in.

I never really got too involved with hanging out with the regular people. I pretty much took my classes, and they had open stage one night a week, and I’d go down there to listen, I didn’t really try then. But I was really interested in the guitar, and I learned to finger-pick a little bit. But more importantly, I got a sense of, boy, maybe I could do this some day. And it’s a whole different idea than trying to make it as rock star. (Dvorak interview 2005)

The Old Town School was presenting to him a different model—not only of how to experience music, but also how to pursue it, and what he could aspire to.

My friends were all learning guitar and everybody has it on their mind when you’re young and learning the guitar, somehow you’re gonna “make it,” you know. I never thought so seriously about becoming an entertainer or a rock star or anything. But it just seemed when I was around those people and we’d go down to the rock club, there was this feeling in the room, it was hard. And the people were rough. And they were gonna make it [...] and I was just learning a G chord, and I was just so intimidated by that whole scene. And I came into the Old Town School—and it was quite a different place then from what it is now, and it was down in the Armitage Building, and that was before they fixed it up, so it was just this very cozy [laughs]. It was nice! And it was wooden, the floors were wooden, and the people were just so nice. And then I saw those teachers working, you know? And they knew about music. (ibid.)
He didn’t yet know much about folk music, beyond the big names like Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger. Before going to the Old Town School, he had only been exposed to mainstream radio hits—“the Beatles, Neil Young and all of that.”

I didn’t really collect records[….] I think the first record I bought was a Bob Dylan record. I had a few records. And then when I started playing, involving myself with the guitar, it just really changed what I listened to. I wanted to listen to—I wasn’t interested so much in bands any more, I wanted to hear what a guy with ten fingers and six strings was doing. That’ll just lead you a certain place when you make that distinction. It leads you to your real teachers. (Dvorak interview 2005)

When Dunbar left for Nashville Dvorak stopped taking classes and began working on his own: “I practiced! I practiced a lot!”

And the jobs I was working were—you know, I didn’t go to college, and I was just loading trucks and working at warehouses and I thought, well, this [playing music] is kind of fun, and at the time, I never—I said, well, just keep having fun, do the next thing. And then around that time, I started thinking a little bit more about it, and I thought, “What about that Old Town School? If I could just get a couple of gigs once in a while, and maybe teach a little bit, that would satisfy me.”

And so I started teaching on my own—and I had no idea how to do that, either. And then I started teaching with the Park District, and of course then the word goes out, and I wound up working for a Moraine Valley Community College—they called and said, “Oh, we hear you’re a guitar teacher!” So I got some experience […] and then I was gonna call the School and say, “I’d like to have a job.” But as it turned out, they called me first[….] Evidently it was a small world. And I was so pleased. (Dvorak interview 2005)

Dvorak was hired to teach guitar at the Old Town School in the fall of 1986. Over the years, he has taught heavily in the guitar program, at all levels, and has also taught banjo. He has taught a steady stream of specialty classes and ensembles as well, all with a strong traditionalist emphasis. He taught a series of specialty guitar classes under the title “Great American Songwriters,” exploring the “songbooks” of Woody Guthrie, Big Bill Broonzy, Townes Van Zandt, and other mid-century troubadours. Later, he taught a class called “American Songbook”
as an ensemble class, with no instrumentation specified, with a similar structure, featuring sessions on songwriters like Pete Seeger or local bard Fred Holstein, or occasionally a topical theme like “protest songs.” Mark has, when possible, personally sought out the sources of his inspiration. A trip to California to visit Brownie McGhee was particularly memorable. “To bring something like that into a class is that thing that I like doing more than, say, oh here’s an interesting subject […] I can speak from direct experience. And I think classes like that are very important for students, too, because you’re getting something you can’t get out of a book.” He also made a point of getting to know Win Stracke before he died, visiting him in his retirement home in the north suburbs, and reached out to Frank Hamilton whenever he visited; Frank and his wife Mary have become good friends of his. In this way, Mark actively works to connect with the past, to be sure that he can pass on a tradition that he has personally touched.

Meanwhile, he has continued to develop a performing career, which, in 2005, was taking up most of his time as he was successfully finding a niche for himself as “Chicago’s Folk Troubadour,” carrying the torch of earlier local musicians like Fred Holstein, Art Thieme and Win Stracke.

These days I do a lot of things for young people and schools. It’s a program that’s taken me fifteen years to develop[…] And I enjoy visiting high-school age kids, middle school, and grade school, colleges. So that’s one whole little world. And then the other world is concerts and coffeehouse-type appearances, which is…it just seems to be I’m reaching to fulfill that now—it’s the thing I want to work on[…]

I was on this radio interview and the woman asked me how I got started in performing, and I told her a couple stories, and she said, “Well, how have you been able to sustain all these years? Folk music isn’t exactly happening.” And I said, “Well, it hasn’t exactly ever gone away, either. But my real secret is I’ve outlasted everybody. All the old-timers are dead now and the young people aren’t following in this. They have their own ideas about what music should be.” And I go, “So the world is my chestnut! I’m the only one doing this it seems.” (Dvorak interview 2005)
He went on to clarify that partly that’s because solo-singer-and-guitar acts are so personal and unique. But teaching and performing left little room in his life for anything else.

What I’ve found in the last few years is music has taken over a whole lot of my life. And I just realized...[quietly] two years ago or something. I was gone for a long time. Traveling and then I’d come back and teach, travel again. [...] And then I got back into writing, and I just woke up every day, play, practice, write, phone calls, get in the car, back, go there, do this. I have no life! [chuckles] Then I come here. Then I go, well, at first when I made that realization, it kind of made me afraid. And I thought, think of all the television I’m missing, and then I thought, this is what we practice for. We practice for this. I’ve always just tried to let things happen. Well, this is happening now. And let it happen. (Dvorak interview 2005)

It was from Frank Hamilton that Mark developed the idea for the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, encouraged by some of his own students. Hamilton and Mike Dunbar returned to OTSFM in 1997 (probably as part of the fortieth anniversary festivities) to lead a workshop for a group of teachers and students; it was billed as “Recreating the First Night of the Old Town School of Folk Music,” but Dunbar and Hamilton clearly just wanted to teach in the here-and-now. They worked on about half a dozen songs in the two-hour workshop, favoring the simple and familiar, like “On Top of Old Smoky,” “Summertime,” and “Skip to My Lou,” in order to focus on the elements of a good, improvised arrangement (OTSFM 1997). “I was so inspired by it,” Mark remembers. “Because they had never met before that day. And here they were, kind of team teaching and taking care of everybody’s interest, had no idea what was gonna happen.”

And I just asked [Frank Hamilton] about teaching and how unbelievable that workshop was. And I said, “Someone should teach a class like that here!” Because at the same time, I had students who were—we’d sit in class and look at papers, and we’d struggle and learn, and then we’d go off to the pub after class, and it’s so dark, but we’d just play!

And at the same time I was talking to Frank, these students were saying, “Why isn’t class more like this?” they said. And I had to be honest, I go, “I don’t know!” And so I was kind of sneaking up on these very same ideas. And I asked Frank, I said, “Somebody should teach that class.” He said, “You should teach that class!” And this was a real breakthrough moment. I said, “I don’t know
enough about music.” And he goes, “What’s that got to do with it?” You know? And he’s right! He said, “You go, you just start. Start playing.” He goes, “Think about explaining things later. Just start playing, make sounds.” (Dvorak interview 2005)

So he did. Around 1998 or 1999 (no one seems to remember exactly which year), Dvorak started teaching the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, which had been running continuously ever since.

And I said [to my students], “Well, if you want to try, I’ll try. But it might be the worst class you’ve ever had.” I mean, I was nervous about it[....] They said, “Oh, sure! Let’s try.” And we tried. And we learned together, really. Which I think is why we’ve remained close. Because of that! And I think there’s something about real learning, when that takes place. You see groups of people start out as beginners, and then they travel on through—they stay together along, and there’s something very galvanizing when real learning takes place. (Dvorak interview 2005)

Maura Lally, one of those students, agreed, respecting Mark for his willingness to learn, as well as for what he was able to teach.

The more Mark taught it, the more he learned, too. He’ll say that about teaching. And it’s really not like he’s giving the stuff to you—you know how a teacher’ll think they’ve gotta take this and you learn it. I think he learns a lot of the time when it’s going on[....] But he can guide you, you know. He steers if you need it. So I’m sure that changed. Too. But that was fun. That’s when we started making fun sounds together. (Browning, Lally and Mitchell interview 2005)

Browning, Lally and Mitchell exemplify this bonding through learning. It was clearly through their experience in the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble with Mark that they began to learn and create the close musical friendship that structures their week now.

We kind of learned that together, in a way. Although we were at different levels. So I find them, they’re kind of my test cases. But now they’ve gone off on their own. They’ve rehearsed up and played gigs once in a while. So I think, I guess what I’m saying is there’s some foundation to this thought in my own experience, that people do respond to it. (Dvorak interview 2005).

The complete absence of paper in class sets the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble apart from most other OTSFIM classes. This was, of course, a conscious decision, based in Hamilton’s
teaching philosophy, as well as the immediate experience of Dvorak and his students. Most
teachers (as we saw in the last chapter) will readily argue that a group always sounds better if
everyone’s eyes are on each other, that reading diverts attention away listening to each other, and
this is certainly at the base of the avoidance of paper in the SFE. Not reading also encourages
the social aspects of music making.

Peggy Browning: And it’s like talking. I love that about music. I think that’s one
of the best things. I think that’s one thing that Mark really taught us, because
without him needing papers—like, you can’t talk when you have a piece of paper
in front of you. So we sort of learned…and I think that’s just one of the neatest
things about music. (Browning, Lally and Mitchell interview 2005)

While the people I interviewed here all found the experience of learning by ear liberating,
not everyone does. Neil Donovan and Ellen Shriver, Grafton Folk Club irregulars and members
of the Jug Band (which, though it performs frequently, retains spirit of the paperless principle, if
not the letter), recalled one student’s unsatisfying experience:

ES: She was…it was interesting to me what her reason was. You know, so many
people before they sign up for classes are, [hushed voice] “Oh, I can’t read music!
I don’t know how to play anything.” It doesn’t matter! It’s just for the fun of it!
We’ve talked a lot of people into taking classes here, and they’re like sweating the
first night ‘cause they think, “Oh my God, everybody’s gonna be better and
everybody else knows what they’re doing. People came up first class and said,
“There was a whole class full of people just like me!”

[…But this student] had classical training in flute, and she couldn’t get beyond
the fact that we were improvising, that every note was not written down, there
was no sheet music to read. And it was just a different type of making music and
she’d never done it before and was not comfortable with it. Now that we have
Heather, who has very much a classical background, and you can just jump in and
do. And it’s just different personalities. But it’s interesting to see those people
come, and they stay or they don’t stay. In our group. (Donovan and Shriver
interview 2005)

The “spontaneous” designation is an accurate description of the program for a typical
evening in the ensemble. Arlo Leach was impressed by this, especially because it was so
contrary to his own style of teaching and rehearsing then.
One thing I remember about Mark’s class is that he doesn’t have an agenda, a list of songs he’s prepared[...]. What he would do in that class, I mean it’s “Spontaneous Folk,” it’s the name of the class—what he would do is come in and say “What have you guys been playing?” And one guy would say “This Train’s Bound for Glory,” and he’d say “That’s a good song. Let’s all play it.” He would just go from there. There was no wrong answer – anything anyone wanted to do we’d give it a shot, we’d start playing it. We might play the song for ten minutes. While we were playing it, Mark might go around and suggest different things different people might do with the song, but it was just very open, and participatory. (Leach interview 2005)

My own observations were quite similar. “Mark opened as usual by asking, ‘so what are we going to play today?’” I wrote after a November class. “Not rhetorically—I think he is genuine in wanting people to bring in songs. On the other hand, I also think he had a lesson plan (so to speak) in mind” (Fieldnotes for November 30, 2004). He would “go with the flow,” but would also channel it, and hit on certain essential concepts of participatory music making quite reliably and consistently, illustrating them differently depending on the material at hand.

Dvorak constantly encouraged—very nearly required—students to bring in songs they want to sing, and while there were no wrong songs, there were better and worse ones. Mark would never do a Beatles song, for example (he would never directly say no, either; just gently suggest another direction). Although Beatles songs are as well-known and beloved as any Woody Guthrie tune, they are too complex in every way for inexperienced musicians to pick up in a few minutes: the chord progressions include surprising twists, the melodies often fit with the harmonies in unexpected ways, the phrasing and meters are sometimes irregular, and they tend not to lend themselves as well to flexible rearrangement—partly because a very specific arrangement is already in everyone’s ear. In short, they are compositions designed for presentational performance, not structured for participatory performance.

Once a song was volunteered, and demonstrated, some time was taken for everyone to learn the song, a process that was a bit different for each instrument and each individual. At
minimum, guitar players needed to learn the chords—quickly for the experienced, painstakingly for those newer at playing the guitar and/or less used to learning by ear. But merely strumming chords was not the goal. Given that any pick-up group is likely to include more than one guitar, Dvorak emphasized ways to vary guitar accompaniments so that all players have the chance to make an audible contribution, teaching different strategies like finding bass lines, adding melodic fills, playing chords higher on the neck, playing tremolos, etc. Essentially, once guitar players find their chord positions, Dvorak explained, they can “throw notes around in there”; they are “lick-oriented” (Fieldnotes for November 2, 2005).

Fiddle players, meanwhile, typically needed to learn the melody—note-for-note, ideally, certainly if it was a fiddle tune, but they at least had to know the contours against which to improvise harmonies and counter-melodies. Dvorak also encouraged them to come up with accompaniment figures as well. On one occasion, for example, when there were four or five fiddle players in class,

Mark had them pick chord tones to drone background harmonies for the verses. He commented that it’s tricky coming up with things for the fiddles to do, but you can’t just say, “fiddles why don’t you sit this one out,” in a group like this, because they’ll just go find another group where they can play! [One older student] volunteered to fill in after the phrases and Mark said, “That’s a great idea.” (Fieldnotes for February 22, 2005)

Everyone was expected to sing. I do not recall any instance where a student demurred that s/he could not or did not wish to sing; it seemed to be an implicit and accepted requirement for the class. Vocal harmonies were usually improvised with ease by any collection of students I joined: “Mark never assigns harmony parts for vocals; we just sing through it several times till the harmony locks in. Even then it’s always changing” (Fieldnotes for February 22, 2005). But Dvorak did on occasion direct simple call-and-response-type vocal arrangements, and at other times would give some attention to vocal intonation, timbre, and dynamics on a rather basic
level; most often his focus was on blending. On timbre, Mark did not go much further than to raise awareness of it, and to suggest matching. The vocal timbre of the group was the open-throated, non-nasal sound most often heard in casual folksinging groups, without ever approaching the formal technique of a choir; I assume, based on the students’ lack of self-consciousness about it and the similarity between their singing and speaking voices, that this felt like the “natural” singing timbre for most of them.

For “The Storms Are O’er the Ocean” we broke into pairs and trios, each taking a different verse. There was an opportunity to sing out, and also to practice accompanying, and backing off. We went all out harmonizing the chorus, no instruction necessary—sounded great, actually. Mark also talked about the “character” of voices. He gave the example of a friend of his who’d been hired to sing backup for Crystal Gayle in Nashville, not because she was better than everyone else but because her voice matched Crystal’s so well. His point was that we should do our best to match the singers of the verse when we sing the chorus (or sing back-up “oohs,” which sometimes happened). If they sing quietly, we should sing quietly, etc. We went through that several times working on different things. (Fieldnotes for November 9, 2004)

Rhythmic unity is another aspect of blending the Dvorak honed in on at times—again, at a very basic level, seeking the simplest basis for rhythmic unison, rather than any elaboration or rhythmic play. While working on “Long Black Veil” one evening,

…he had us sing the chorus, a capella, steadily and carefully, so that we were scanning the words the same way at the same time. His basic approach (we’d done this exercise on other songs in the past) was to place the words straight on the beat as much as possible, in a slow and steady march-like tempo. I remember doing this last fall some time, and Mark being very pleased when we got it as straight, metronomically together as possible. None of that gospel-esque, interweaving independent lines here! (Fieldnotes for February 22, 2005)

Taking a close look at one song on one evening will illustrate a number of Dvorak’s teaching techniques and the habits of the group. On a drop-in visit in September of 2005, I brought in a song to sing, “Satisfied Mind,” and because the version I presented was a little out
of step with the version most people knew and with Mark’s needs for the ensemble, the way it
was reworked that night illustrates well that group’s ideas of participatory structures.

Predictably, Mark asked me if I had something I wanted to sing. I had, at least,
predicted this and had something to say (took me long enough to get the hang of
this). I first volunteered a[n Old Town School] Songbook song, for ease of
doing—“Done Laid Around,” which I relate to, but no, they’d already done that
one before I got there. So I offered the one I really wanted to do, “Satisfied
Mind,” in spite of the fact that I’ve been doing it as a solo song, with no chorus,
and two different chord progressions. (Fieldnotes for September 27, 2005)

I had been listening to Lucinda Williams’ version of the country song, “Satisfied Mind,” as she
recorded it on her 1979 album Ramblin’. Williams sings the song simply, accompanying herself
on the acoustic guitar, and to add her personal twist, she stretches each line from four bars of ¾
to eight. The melody and chord progression are almost the same in every line, in the song’s most
basic expression; like other versions of the song, Williams varied both the melody and the chord
progression in the third line of alternate versions. I had inadvertently mixed variants of the
lyrics, simplified the rhythmic structure back down to four-bar lines, and misremembered the
third line of the second and fourth verses as shown in Example 8.1. This made it somewhat
unfamiliar even to those who knew the song.

I sang it through and those as could followed along. That being Mark. Sue
[Strom] and Ted [Johnson] found some notes [on fiddle], and M--- and [another
student] got some of the chords [on guitar], but couldn't catch the pattern on one
time through. Then Mark started in changing the song into something we could
all do together. First of all we declared the first verse to be the chorus. But by the
time we got through the whole thing, Mark had chosen just the last line repeated
as the chorus. (ibid.)

Designating a chorus was an essential first step because it obviated the need for everyone to learn
the lyrics; anyone can learn a line or two of words on the fly.

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Written by Red Hayes and Jack Rhodes, “Satisfied Mind” was popularized by Porter Wagoner
in the 1950s. Over the years, it has been covered by many singers in the country and folk revival
musical worlds, including Bob Dylan, the Byrds, Johnny Cash, and Joan Baez, each artist finding
their own subtle variant on the simple, repetitive melody and the basic I-V-IV-I progression.
Example 8.1: “Satisfied Mind,” version idiosyncratically remembered by the author

1st and 3rd verses:

How many times have you heard someone say, 
A E D A
If I had his money, I'd do things my way. 
A E D A
But little they know that it's so hard to find 
A E D A
A rich man in a hundred with a satisfied mind. 
A E D A

2nd and 4th verses:

Once I was winning at fortune and fame. 
A E D A
I had all that I needed to succeed at life's game. 
A E D A
Then suddenly it happened, I lost every dime, 
A D D E
But I'm richer by far with a satisfied mind. 
A E D A

Ted and Mark both knew different versions of it, unsurprisingly. [Mark] pointed out that musical performances are one of the most boring things to watch on TV, even though they are so exciting in person. So performers must do more to keep people's attention, which usually involves taking their clothes off. But his actual point in this case was, I believe, the alternating chord progressions, which of course we would have to simplify. (ibid.)

Mark’s folk-conservative hyperbole was merely intended to point out the different musical requirements of participatory and presentational performance. The version of the song that Mark knew, which he demonstrated for us, was closer to what Lucinda Williams had actually played, I believe even with her extended eight-bar lines, but he never corrected mine, just offered his as a more effective variation. The chord progression for every verse was:

A-E-D-A
A-E-D-A
A-D-E-A
A-E-D-A
After we played through that, Ted said to everyone, “Don’t you like that better?” Mark pointed out that this way, there would consistently be one chord change per measure, making it easier to follow. Again, without criticizing my memory, both he and Ted remarked that an A at the end of the third line sounded more correct.

Around this time, Mark had us play through it over and over (sometimes me singing, sometimes not), to give [the two guitar students] the chance to get the chord progression. […] So we played it through that way for a while. I was still just strumming, but starting to be sure and put the bass in there because that was clearly my responsibility. (ibid.)

Using simple repetition as a learning method is, of course, nearly universal, but particularly crucial when the learning is entirely aural.

Next step was to come up with more interesting guitar parts. Mark showed us a couple of two-note, two-string licks with a little slide, up the neck around the fifth fret that are very effective ingredients for a simple solo, or commentary. So [the two guitar students] worked on those for a while--mainly M---, as [the other] was still working on the chords. Meanwhile Ted and Sue were getting the melody. And I kept bass-strumming away to keep the whole thing on track. Sue and Mark complimented me on keeping the tempo well. Ted seemed impressed with Mark's teaching of these little licks, said he hadn't seen that before. By which I'm sure he did not mean the musical content, but rather breaking it down so far, into such a little teachable tidbit, which nonetheless makes good music. Mark even demonstrated a little solo using just those gestures. Sounded pretty good.

Once that was working, Mark did his spiel I'd heard more than once before about finding other parts to play if there are a bunch of guitars playing. He told an anecdote about Woody Guthrie, how […] Guthrie always said, put him on a stage with sixteen guitar players, and he'd be the guy trying to find the seventeenth part.

So then Mark pointed out playing chords up the neck, like he usually does, and started doing mandolin-like tremolos, and pointed out all the parts we had going now. (ibid.)

He described them in terms of the instruments they were imitating: the guitar (bass and strum, keeping the rhythm), dobro (the sliding, two-note licks), mandolin (tremolos), and of course the actual fiddles. “And I was singing the verses, with everyone harmonizing on our one-line
chorus. We went through the first verse one last time this way, and it sounded pretty put-together” (Fieldnotes for September 27, 2005).

The Spontaneous Folk Ensemble rarely or organized any activities outside of class, much less gigs. The focus was entirely on the process of learning to play together, with no particular performance goals. It was not conceived of as a collective entity, as the Jug Band and Beatles Ensemble were; rather, as a shared activity. And while many friendships fed into and emerged from the class, the social arrangements seemed equally loose and not based in the class, but rather benefiting from the tools learned in class.

ML: I think you start looking at each other, and you start making music with other people, and it changed every class session. And there were regulars that were in there. And we were in there for years. But it switched every week, it switched according to what instruments you had and it was exciting! And if you get a little taste of that…

PB: You keep going.

ML: I think you want more of that.

PB: Yeah.

ML: So, I mean that wasn’t the only class, but it makes you—that kind of holds the standard up. Because of, not that it’s Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, it’s just the way you’re playing, making music with people. (Browning, Lally and Mitchell interview 2005)

*The Grafton Folk Club*. Mark Dvorak began organizing a biweekly get-together at the Grafton Irish Pub, next door to the Old Town School, shortly after it opened in early 2004, the first bar added to the mix in the neighborhood gentrification process with a suitable space and atmosphere (“Finally we have a bar!” Browning and Lally recalled their excitement. “We waited for years!” [Browning, Lally and Mitchell interview 2005]). Every other Tuesday, a couple dozen people would gather at the pub at around 10:00 pm, after the last class at OTSF was over, and would usually play until well past midnight.
There are black and white framed photos of Irish scenes and people, mostly old, on the walls. Dark wood, high-walled booths and dark wood bar, old fashioned with a mirror. It’s long and narrow like most Chicago properties, and if you keep going back, past the restrooms, you get to an open room with sofas and a coffee table clustered around a large fireplace, complete with hearth and mantel. That’s where Folk Club is held of course (the rest of the bar was filled with ordinary non-singing people, who ignored the musical goings on and, I think, couldn’t even hear them that well).

There were about twenty people there when I arrived, most of whom I recognized. Mark seemed to know everyone by name. Mark sat next to the fireplace, facing out, and was very much the song leader. H--- sat next to him with her guitar. The sofas were at the center of the cluster, and two people on one of the sofas did not participate much, but just sat back and listened. On the other sofa were a fiddle and harmonica player and a guy playing guitar. In chairs radiating out from this center were [Peggy, Maura and Louie]. Also present were R---, who was in Gary Snyderman’s Hard Cryin’ Tour band—she invited me to sit down next to her. And a guy who was accomplished on tin whistle, trombone, and guitar[…]. There was another mandolin player over to my left. Sue Strom was there, on fiddle, and there was at least one other fiddle player somewhere in the mix. (Fieldnotes for February 1, 2005)

“The Folk Club at the Grafton” was basically an open-door version of the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble class, without the pedagogical emphasis, though learning was still an integral part of the experience. It was very clearly associated with the Old Town School, advertised on flyers posted there, and most if not all participants were drawn from the School in one way or another, a significant majority of which were current or former students of Dvorak’s, but there was no official OTSFM sponsorship and Dvorak used his own email list to spread the word. The inclusive welcome was genuine and I saw a handful of new faces almost every time I went, but there was a core group of regulars who tended to move in the same musical-social circles as the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, the Pickin’ Bubs and their lobby friends, and to a lesser extent, the Jug Band. Some of the regulars I only ever ran into at the Grafton Folk Club, however.

Like SFE, the Grafton Folk Club seems to have been a group inspiration, evolving from experiences shared by Dvorak and a group of his SFE students.
Polly Parnell: Well, the Grafton actually was such a good idea with Mark, because we took—it was the first semester I took Spontaneous Folk Group that we had such a fun group […] and we had a meeting in the library where one of the class members was on staff, so we took it to a library and sang one evening. And out of that I think we had such a good time and we thought, you know, we’d like to do it somewhere else, and I think on Tuesdays they had an open mike at the Grafton already[…]. So we took over a couple of those open mike nights, and it just worked out pretty well. Because even if we don’t have twenty-five people, we always have ten. Sometimes we have thirty-five, but we always have ten people that go over. And you know, it’s just like if you’re an orthodox Jew, ten people make a congregation! So ten people getting together and singing, it’s ok, you know! So it’s OK!

TL: Do you go every time?

PP: I really try to go every time. I live so close that I try to go over. And when Mark’s not there, Bill, the guy who plays the violin, says, “Ask Polly, she knows more songs than anybody!” So I like to go over, yeah. I probably do know more songs. (Parnell interview 2005)

Indeed, a Tuesday evening at the Grafton was all about the songs. Just like in SFE, Dvorak consistently relied on those present to generate the song choices, providing guidance in selection, in breaking down new songs so others could learn them, and in encouraging varied arrangements.

He singles out one person in the room and asks them what they would like to play, and does a good job of moving around the room and giving a lot of people a chance to pick [a song]. At one point, he asked the guitar player in front of me and he just said “pass,” as if it were a card game. (Fieldnotes for February 1, 2005)

And as in class, instrumental playing was given more attention than singing, but without taking the time to learn new skills; this was an environment for exercising whatever skills the players already had.

There was a heavy emphasis on instrumentals over singing most of the time, so there were always instrumental breaks between the verses, and again Mark would call out somebody’s name to take the lead each break. Here, though, he was not as egalitarian as with song choice. He only picked people he knew liked to take solos and had the competence and confidence to do so. Occasionally he’d pick pairings. Once it was harmonica and trombone, because he said he’d never heard it!
The person called nearly always did take the melody (though sometimes it was hard to hear, depending on many factors), but that person was never the only one. Everyone kept playing, many of course just keeping the harmonies and rhythm going. Some people went right ahead and worked out audible counter melodies, or response phrases. Others quietly picked out melodies to themselves, experimentally, and could only be heard intermittently or if you were right next to them. In general, I think there was great variety in how loudly people played or sang. Certainly there was a lot of variety in skill level, from just listening to expert solos. (*ibid.*)

Even the more accomplished players did not exhibit a high degree of virtuosity—possibly because it was beyond their reach, but showy solos like those performed by the guitar teachers at Second Half would have been out of place aesthetically and socially at the Grafton. The soloing structure gave those who were confident enough a chance to shine (and a chance for Mark to encourage those on the cusp of being confident enough), as well as some variety for the ear—everyone was listening for pleasure at the same time that they were playing for pleasure. It also allowed for a great deal of repetition, keeping a simple song from becoming monotonous, while still giving even the slower learners a chance to pick up the basic melody and chord progression.

Teaching was another one of the skills practiced at the Grafton. Since anyone could suggest a song, it might sometimes be unfamiliar to many, and especially if, as occasionally happened, Mark didn’t know the song well, either (or even if he did), the person who suggested it was responsible for presenting it in such a way that everyone else could catch on.

One of the newer people suggested “Nine-Pound Hammer” at one point, which was enthusiastically accepted. Mark advised him to let us know the chords first. He said it’s like driving a semi (with this many people)—gotta make wide turns! “And signal!”—someone else offered. “Nine Pound” went well, good energetic easy song that’s not as much of a chestnut. (*Fieldnotes for March 15, 2005*)

Dvorak often employed the simple strategy of playing slowly, which of course gave the beginners the time to catch the chords as they went by, while providing elbow room for more advanced players to work out improvised elaborations.
I believe the next song picked was “I Can’t Help Falling In Love.” Mark took it at a very slow, sentimental tempo, which offered the opportunity for lots of easy finger-picking and soloistic elaboration. There was of course a lot of vocal harmonization. We went through the whole thing two or three times, and at the conclusion, Mark said, “Wasn’t that beautiful. Maybe someday that will become a folk song.” (Fieldnotes for February 1, 2005)

Although Dvorak and many of the participants seemed to have a clearly delineated definition of folk music—which would exclude a song recorded by Elvis Presley, already beloved for generations as eighteenth-century French composer Jean Paul Egide Martini’s art song “Plaisir d’Amour”—song choices at the Grafton were not confined to those boundaries. As in SFE, familiarity was paramount—of the musical materials most importantly (familiar chord progressions, melodic figures, and song structures), but also often of the song in its entirety. In general, the songs sung at the Grafton leaned strongly toward older, traditional American songs, such as “St. James Infirmary,” and well-known early country music, like the Carter Family’s “May the Circle Be Unbroken,” but also those that merely sound old and traditional, such as the usual suspects from the folk revival, like Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind,” or slightly more recent singer-songwriter creations like John Prine’s nostalgic ode to Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, “Paradise.” A few older popular songs were thrown in the mix; the old jazz/pop standard “The Glory of Love” seemed to be a favorite, most likely because Big Bill Broonzy once recorded it on acoustic guitar. Occasionally, there would be a purely instrumental jam on a standard ragtime or blues chord progression not based on any specific tune. There was a high tolerance for sentimentality and a preponderance of songs as would be considered hackneyed in other contexts. The week of St. Patrick’s Day, someone rather predictably chose “Danny Boy.”

Really lovely, especially for the whistle. The thing about this group is that everything is sung with such sincerity that even with something often mocked like “Danny Boy,” a chestnut, the group seems willing to just dig into its original beauty and sing it like they mean it. There’s never any sarcasm[...]. Another chestnut given heart that evening was “Home On the Range.” These are songs
that people just wouldn’t dare bring up in other contexts, except with kids. Yet they’re not at all kids’ songs. And here we play them because they’re songs everybody knows and everybody can work with. (Fieldnotes for March 15, 2005)

Dvorak’s role in directing the social dynamic of the group was just as important as his musical role, and he played it subtly yet deliberately, and in such a way as to direct the attention of those present to each other, rather than to himself. As in class, he was gentle and encouraging, considerate of participants’ various and changing levels of confidence. With the more open structure of the Folk Club, however, Dvorak’s behavior also influenced the timing of the evening and the comings and goings of those gathered. At the beginning of the evening, he might take charge of rearranging the furniture around the fireplace into a layout everyone found agreeable before launching the first song. He would make sure that everyone felt welcome: “As before, Mark went around greeting everyone he knew and introducing himself to new faces and trying to learn their names” (Fieldnotes for March 15, 2005). The way that he nearly invisibly negotiated the selection of songs by the participants and was sensitive to who was or wasn’t ready to take a solo not only kept the music accessible to all, but also effectively pre-empted any feelings of competitiveness or inadequacy, holding egos at bay so that everyone could focus on each other and the songs. Though it was clear that everyone arrived with this cooperative attitude in mind, work had to be done to maintain it. Dvorak’s effective leadership had a downside as well; the group was sometimes unwilling to go on without him, and the evening usually ended when he left. Other times, they would get together without him, if perhaps he was unable to make it—Polly Parnell was one who often took on a leadership role in picking songs—but the Dvorak-free evening I attended seemed to lack energy and focus.

Without Mark, it was a small crowd, easily fitting in a lumpy circle around the hearth. There was a guy who’d sort of taken charge—I recognized him but don’t know him. [...] Aside from the smallness and Marklessness of the evening, it was a pretty typical Folk Club, in choice of materials, in running through the chords
first. Needs were expressed more readily in the smaller group, though—like needing to go through the chords one more time before starting in for real. In general the songs tended to end a lot sooner than when Mark leads, and the rhythm was maybe a little less cohesive. Not as much soloing. Everyone seemed tireder than usual, and there was a fumey smell (they’d just redone the floors) that started getting to us. So we wrapped up between 12 and 12:30. (Fieldnotes for April 19, 2005)

The spectrum of musicians at the Grafton Folk Club, from shy beginners to more confident instrumentalists who are willing to solo, from those whose solos are tentative and experimental riffs on the basic melody to those who are able to express more complex and original ideas, created a musical and social environment highly conducive to participation, correlating with Turino’s description of the requisite elements.

The inclusion of people with a wide range of abilities within the same performance is important for inspiring participation. The presence of other people with similar abilities as oneself makes joining in comfortable. If only virtuosic performers were present, the gap between them and neophytes would be too great, and inexperienced performers would be discouraged. When rank beginners, people with some limited skill, intermediates, and experts all perform together, however, people at each level can realistically aspire to and practically follow the example of people at the next level above them. In participatory contexts, the full range of the learning curve is audibly and visually present and provides reachable goals for people at all skill levels. (Turino 2008, 30)

This will be seen even more dramatically in the Beatles Ensemble, where the participatory group dynamic was simultaneously staged for an audience, but at the Grafton, the focus was entirely inward, on the group members themselves.

The Pickin’ Bubs

Today was the day for the triple interview. I had this notion that it would be cool (and appropriate) to interview Peggy, Maura, and Louie [i.e., Mark Mitchell] all together, as what I was most interested in was how their friendship had developed through music. These are the three who play in the lobby of the Old Town School every Tuesday evening, without fail, from approximately 5:00 until closing time. Sometimes they sit right in the main lobby, in which case it’s an invitation to an open jam—people stop by and listen and join in. Other times, they set up in the alcove leading to the emergency exit on the landing between the main floor and the basement, a signal that they are having a somewhat more private rehearsal.
Still, SFE-related friends might stop by and join in on a chorus. (Fieldnotes for May 17, 2005)

Peggy Browning, Maura Lally and Mark Mitchell—whom Peggy and Maura call “Louie” for some reason—have been friends since before the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble class started, and were among that first group of students that pushed Mark Dvorak to get it going. Before they started taking guitar lessons in the mid-1990s, well into adulthood, only Maura had had any significant musical training (five years playing flute in the school band as a child) and none of them had ever played a string instrument or been involved in any sort of folk music scene. The families they grew up in were not notably musical, though they would sing around the house, and their own educations and occupations were unrelated to their musical lives; at the time of our interview, Lally worked in a law office, Browning was a bookkeeper and accountant, and Mitchell worked for a printing company—though Browning was also working as a house manager for OTSFM evening concerts occasionally (Browning, Lally and Mitchell interview 2005).

They participated in SFE steadily for about four years before breaking off to play on their own. “I think at some point we decided that the three of us—like all of a sudden it was like, wow! This is so much fun. And we have these really nice sounds” (Browning, Pickin’ Bubs interview 2005). So they settled into their Tuesday night pattern, holding what has become essentially a porously public Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, or an organic Second Half, in the OTSFM lobby. They also began playing out, at first ambivalently.

ML: Peggy [and I], we were on a bike ride and she was saying, “I think we could play at the Folk and Roots festival on the staff stage” and again, I think, “I’m not doing that. I don’t want to do this.” [With] Louie and some other friends[…]  

PB: But that’s kinda how…  

MM: In the beginning of—
PB: …the Pickin’ Bubs started though.

MM & ML: Yeah.

PB: And we were known as Peggy Browning and Friends. [laughter]

ML: I think it was just Peggy Browning!

MM: Yeah, and we had a half hour and we played for ten minutes.

PB: Yeah, and we ran off that stage so fast!

Opportunities for public performance gradually accumulated and by the time I met them, they had enough of a performing identity to have picked a name (though most people around the Old Town School still knew them just as Peggy, Maura and Louie). “We call ourselves the Pickin’ Bubs. And we get that name from Big Bill Broonzy,” Maura explained. “Well, ‘bub’ means buddy, it means friend. He has a really good tune called ‘The Hey Bub Blues,’” and “pickin’,” the string-playing modifier, of course, was to evoke an unpretentious, back-porch aesthetic (Browning, Lally and Mitchell interview 2005). In 2005, they secured a regular gig at a small bar on Lincoln Avenue and regularly performed at Old Town School community-focused events, like commemoratory and tribute concerts, First Fridays, and the Staff Stage at the Folk and Roots Festival. (Even though only Peggy was an occasional staff member at the time, they had become such fixtures in the School, they were as well known as many teachers, and in fact, by 2010, both Peggy and Maura had become OTSFM teachers.)

Although the music they play could glibly be glossed as “folk,” it is perhaps more accurate (if equally broad) to call it “old”; the Pickin’ Bubs did not choose their songs based on genre or purview.

TL: How would you describe the set of music that you tend to focus on?

MM: It’s always troublesome.
ML: It’s very hard to say.

MM: ‘Cause a lot of people ask us.

ML: I think…

PB: It’s old.

ML: It’s old, traditional. And it’s big mishmash of stuff, though, really. I mean there’s traditional folk songs that are—and I don’t mean singer-songwriterly songs—you know, old songs that have been passed down. And a lot of stuff that’s in the songbook. You know, that kind of stuff. We like to say we play the [unclear] [laughs]

TL: The what?

M: The blues. And I think we do, we do in our own way. Work on some fiddle tunes.

PB: I don’t know if you could say, “Oh, we’re bluegrass!”

ML: No.

PB: Or we’re—‘Cause I think we’re sort of like all that.

ML: We throw in old standards and it’s fun. And we try to do it our own way. I think that’s one of the best things that we’ve learned.

Their song choices were basically consistent with those of the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble and the Grafton Folk Club (especially when they were playing in the lobby, welcoming all comers), but they had the luxury of working up more complicated arrangements, ones that suited their individual strengths, and ones that benefited from more presentational arrangements, though even in performance, they still evoked the spirit of a pick-up band.

Like most modern cosmopolitans, they learned a lot from recordings, but their interest was usually in learning the song—the tune, harmonies, and lyrics—not the performance on the record. They meant for their performance to be their own, while the song remained in the possession of the tradition.
ML: You know when you start listening—we all love listening to music. That’s a thing we have in common. But when you start playing music, you gotta learn from something, so you go to your Neil Young records and you’ve got those tunes in you. But then when you start making music, you put your one little spin into it, and so it comes out different. I don’t think anything we do…

MM: It might start out closer to the original, then the longer we play it—

PB: The more it comes out.

MM: —it evolves. It’s not like we first are playing it instantly we have a personal stamp on it [women laugh]. It takes a while.

ML: And that’s when you know it’s yours, I think. One of your songs. Not like it’s our song, but it’s the most comfortable feel, like, “well, that’s fun to play.” (Pickin’ Bubs interview 2005)

This approach to learning contrasts to that of the Beatles Ensemble, whose participatory ethos is arrived at through faithfulness to the original recording.

The Pickin’ Bubs’ priority was social, of course; not in the sense that playing music was an excuse to get together, but in that music was the means of their social interaction, and the origin of their friendship.

TL: How do you know when you’ve found a musical friend? […]

ML: I think it’s the same way as you know—I mean, it’s a friendship.

PB: I think you have a conversation with your instruments in a way.

ML: And maybe it’s different for—I would say if someone was looking for a band, looking to get a thing going, that’s probably a different relationship. None of us were doing that. I mean, that was a joke: well, let’s get up and play on the stage. That’s not a joke, but—

PB: Yeah, it was never the goal.

ML: It’s not like “let’s have a band.”

PB: It was like, we’d sit out here and we’d play and we met so many people sitting at this table. […] This is like a little spot where just people come and go and it’s really neat, to sit in this hallway and just have people play with each other, jam.
ML: Sometimes it’s just—I mean, it rings in here. I think, who are these people, they leave, and then there’s other times when it’s just loud and it’s noisy—but that’s still a good time, too! [...] (Browning, Lally and Mitchell interview 2005)

I asked them about the simple mechanics of meeting people musically, in their Tuesday night jams, how people know to or decide to join in, and how relationships can begin.

TL: So people just come by, and you’re playing some song, and they sort of stand at the fringes, and then sometimes join in?

MM: Yeah. Or there’ll be people, sometimes teachers’ll come by and just step right in for a song or two and then get going somewhere else.

TL: So it depends on their confidence?

MM: Yeah.

ML: And, I think the approachability. I would hope that if we’re sitting up here that it’s a welcoming thing. You know, there’s times when we’re working on something, and that’s when we hide in that little room. Because, you know, that’s your time to play with each other.

TL: So there are times when you don’t necessarily want lots of random people.

ML: Right. But I think if you’re sitting up here, you’re saying, OK, welcome.

TL: And you often, like, explicitly invite people in, right?

ML: Yeah. I think you learn to pay attention.

PB: Yeah.

ML: And you watch. Sometimes there’s people that you know they want to play, and I’ve felt that, and we’ve all had that feeling, and all you need is someone to look at you. But not to put you on the spot, necessarily, to look at you. You know, you make eye contact—just, I don’t know. I think that’s a good thing. Not like we sit here doing that consciously, like, “Tuesday night, you meet at the table.”

TL: But you do have a standing date for Tuesday night.

ML: Yeah, we do. [all laugh uproariously] Yeah, all right, we do.
Obviously, as many musical friends as they might have at the Old Town School and beyond, Peggy, Maura and Louie shared a special connection—and an especially durable one. They credited the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble for teaching them the musical social skills that brought them together and keeps them playing.

PB: I think we all sort of had the same ideas, musically. And one, I’ll tell you—and Louie said this once—we’ve all taken that Spontaneous [Folk Ensemble]. So we all learned in the same way. Of how to learn something together. And I think we all—we have different tastes, in different songs and different music, but that we all have this common pool of…and even if it’s a song somebody loves and somebody else doesn’t know, it’s always some musical happening, you know? And I think that’s what…I think ‘cause we pay attention to each other, I guess.

ML: I think that’s right.

PB: And you get other people and they don’t—and you think, oh, they’re not playing as close attention, or it’s just not the same. I don’t even know…it’s hard to put to words, I guess.

ML: They want different things. Which is fine. (Browning, Lally and Mitchell interview 2005)

The Jug Band Ensemble: The Hump Night Thumpers

The Jug Band Ensemble belonged with the Spontaneous Folk Clan socially and at the level of root inspiration, but very quickly took flight in new directions; it is actually an example of new clan formation, I suspect.

We went on for our sound check, which was very minimal, just on the lead mikes. We had a lot of mikes […] though still more people than mikes. I hung out at one side with my spoons and my vocals rather far from a mike. Again, the band did not seem nervous, very cheerful, of course excited. But really professional in a way. Not in the sense of polish, but in the sense of knowing what to do to do what they do. Cool addition by the sound guys: place a mike underneath the plastic garbage can resonator of the “washtub” bass.

And then we just began. Started with “Stealin’”—a capella on the first chorus. They were nervous about that because at the last gig, they had been totally flat to start and it was not a pretty thing. But Arlo gave us a clear G chord on the guitar and we hit it and were off. They are awesome. I am so impressed with how much
un-self-conscious energy they put into performing. I’ve never felt so comfortable on such a big stage in front of so many people. And although I’d been grievously struggling to stay on the beat practicing with the CD, I didn’t have any trouble with the band, there was such a confident groove going. Audience appreciation rose with each song—Rag Mama in particular notched it right up, and her husband’s song, too. How did they learn to sing so well, and not only to sing, but to be so at-ease with performing?

The Jug Band set was a total success, I felt. And even though my contribution was minimal, I had a blast. And “got” it for the first time. (Fieldnotes for July 9, 2005)

The above describes the Hump Night Thumper’s early afternoon performance on the Main Stage at the Old Town School’s Folk & Roots Festival—my first performance with them, having only joined the class a couple of weeks before, and also a rare instance of a student ensemble playing the largest of stage at the festival, the one that headlining acts played in the evenings. I had become aware of this dynamic new performing ensemble’s presence in the Old Town School mix some time in the spring of 2005. It would have been hard not to notice them: they turned up first at a graduation in February, then led a Six-String Social in March, performed at a First Friday and played a set at the Van Morrison Tribute Concert in April, and created a ruckus in the lobby for a membership drive in May, all the while playing a cascade of outside gigs at bars and community events around the North Side. And they were loud, and played kazoo! Yet Arlo Leach had only been offering the Jug Band Ensemble class since January.

“The original concept was homemade instruments,” Arlo explained to me in our interview. Inspired by the amateur brilliance of the recordings in Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952), Leach had offered a class on that compendium during 2004; it had not been an enrollment success, but it drew his attention to jug band music.

One student brought me a DVD, a collection of old newsreel footage of famous folk musicians of the twenties and thirties […] It had some jug band stuff on it. In one of the jug band acts on that – one guy playing ukulele, one playing kazoo, after a while he played a teapot. Then he put the kazoo back, after he played it for
a while he put a piece of rubber hose over it. It was amazing to me because they sounded great, but were poor and very creative and were doing really neat things with what they had. I was inspired by that and started looking into jug band music more specifically and learning more about it. Again, the original concept was homemade instruments – “you can take things around your house and make music on them, you don’t need to spend money on it.” [...] What a great way to show that you don’t need to be special, you don’t even need a real musical instrument to play music. (Leach interview 2005)

Usually treated as a footnote to blues history, jug bands were an African American phenomenon of urban South during the first half of the twentieth century; although they were primarily street buskers, commercial recordings were made and survived to be rediscovered by the folk music revivalists of the 1960s. A brief fad brought the jug band concept to mainstream ears through records by Dave Van Ronk’s Ragtime Jug Stompers, Jim Kweskin’s Jug Band and other white musicians, filling nightclubs and even Carnegie Hall in 1963 (Stambler and Stambler 2001, 344). The do-it-yourself aesthetic inspired many young people, like the teenaged Ellen Shriver, to put together their own jug bands. The Hump Night Thumpers found themselves in 2005 on the cusp of a second wave of jug band enthusiasm, at least locally; by 2008 Chicago supported enough performing jug bands to launch an annual “Battle of the Jug Bands.”

Inspired like his predecessors in the 1960s by the Harry Smith Anthology, Leach proposed a jug band class in late 2004 to Jimmy Tomasello, who thought it was a good idea—“He’s really open to new ideas” (Leach interview 2005). “No experience necessary,” read the class description in the January-April 2005 catalog, “and no instruments worth over $75 allowed.” When I joined the class for its fourth session, beginning in late June, the ensemble had about a dozen students, the majority of whom had been enrolled since the beginning; but the group dynamic now often resembled that of a band more than a class. Although I only played with the jug band for about two months, I felt that I got to know them quite well—certainly faster than I had the members of any other class—and many of the other members felt that way
as well; the group seemed to have “clicked” immediately. Sallie Gaines, who had joined in the second session, observed,

I think it was serendipity that the right eight people signed up for the first class. Because I think if people had not gotten along, or everyone coincidentally wanted to do the same thing, I think the class would have been boring, and half of the people would have dropped out, and you would have had a bunch of new people, and you might never have gotten that click. (Gaines interview 2005)

They were “gutsy” and “willing to try anything,” Leach said (Leach interview 2005).

Neil Donovan, who, with his wife Ellen Shriver, had been one of the original eight and had encouraged their friend Sallie to join, described the musical extroversion serendipitously shared by the group.

But what happened is everybody—whether they knew what a jug was or anything—they had enthusiasm that you wouldn’t believe. Whether they had talent or not really didn’t matter. ‘Cause everybody was enthusiastic. So it was kind of like—he handed out a song list and everybody just started playing and singing without even knowing what the songs were, really. (Neil Donovan, in Donovan and Shriver interview 2005)

As a consequence, the group bonded quickly, and soon had in-jokes and shared memories, and had give each other corny jug band nicknames. As a veteran of the folk revival, Polly “Jailbyrd” Parnell was a natural to join the class. “Well actually, I always loved jug bands. Jim Kweskin, I loved him! But I never played in a jug band before. I knew how to play spoons and stuff. But I just thought it looked like fun” (Parnell interview 2005). Ellen Shriver (who had somehow dodged a nickname) and her husband Neil Donovan (Breeze Knees) were of the same generation as Polly. Ellen was the only member who had played in jug bands in the 1960s revival; she had grown up on an Illinois farm, improvising music with her siblings on whatever instruments or kitchen implements were available, and so when her older brother brought home jug band recordings from the thriving folk music scene at the University of Illinois, “this was something that was very easy to pick up.” Ellen and her high school friends formed a jug band
and took it with them to Northern Illinois University. Her husband Neil, on the other hand, was “one of the teeming masses that played guitar in my youth,” a self-described “rock-and-roller” who was nonetheless curious about a wide range of musical styles; he became interested in jug bands through his wife—“I liked the vaudeville aspect of it—lot of tongue-in-cheek, lot of joking going on” (Donovan and Shriver interview 2005).

Other members of approximately the same generation were less familiar with jug bands, but also experienced performers. Steve Keefe (C.W. Possum) was driving an hour and a half each way from St. Charles, Illinois, once a week to take classes at the Old Town School—Hawaiian ukulele at first, then jug band, where he refined and expanded his ukulele skills—to develop a new post-retirement career as a children’s entertainer. He had had no previous musical experience at all, but had owned a circus prior to becoming a public school teacher. “But I came up in the sixties so folk music was the thing. And I had always enjoyed it. […] I had a rough I idea [of what jug band music was]. I think I’d heard, you know, some of it. Everybody’d heard a little washboard—somewhere along the line. But I wasn’t really into the music.” Sallie Gaines (Princess Jugs) was recruited by Ellen and Neil and brought a strong stage presence from years of public speaking, but lacked confidence in her musical abilities; “I had heard of jug bands, and I thought of them as spoons and washboards….But I just literally stumbled into it blind” (Gaines and Keefe interview 2005). Fran Landt, finally, joined the ensemble the same session that I did. Married to Skip Landt, harmonica teacher at the Old Town School, she was a former OTSFМ teacher herself and surely familiar with jug band music.

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3 Although I interviewed Sallie Gaines and Steve Keefe together for the sake of convenience, they are not married and only knew each other through jug band.
The younger people in the class had little to no prior associations with jug band music. Jerri “Rag Mama” and Mark “Harry Assface” Wagner, a married couple in their late twenties, had both had significant performing experience in their backgrounds—Mark in his high school rock band and Jerri more seriously as a musical theater major in college. Like Ellen, Jerri spent part of her childhood on a farm, where spontaneous music-making in the family was the norm; her brother has in fact become a semi-professional singer-songwriter. Both employed by non-profit organizations, Jerri and Mark depended upon OTSFM’s scholarship program and system of volunteer points to pay for classes, and in their three years at the School they had become heavily involved, taking classes every session and volunteering at two or three times a month. Mark had been one of the only students, along with Polly, who joined jug band as a result of having taken Arlo Leach’s Anthology of American Folk Music class, and brought Jerri along. For both of them, their immediate association was the 1977 children’s television special “Emmet Otter’s Jug-Band Christmas” by Muppets creator Jim Henson (rebroadcast well into the childhoods of the 1980s). “It just sort of sounded like it’d be fun to be in a jug band and we just thought we’d do it once and make our own instruments or whatever, but then we really enjoyed the music itself and the group and the fact that we were actually performing and sounding kind of all right, so we just sort of stuck with it” (Mark Wagner, in Wagner and Wagner interview 2005).

Another member was a new mother in her twenties taking the class as her weekly “night out”; a former bassoon performance major, after college, she realized that she hadn’t been having much fun playing music. So she started taking banjo lessons at OTSFM and joined the jug band

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4 “Assface” was pronounced “ass-fa’chay.”
after seeing them play at her neighborhood potluck. Two young men, both with interests in the arts, theatrical and literary, rounded out the ensemble.

The diversity of personality and experience in the group was no barrier to an immediate musical affinity, and some found it a benefit.

I’ve been really enjoying the intergenerational atmosphere of the class, like even though we’re not really racially diverse at all, which is sort of one of the things that—the only downside that I have about the Old Town School is that I think it’s generally a lot of white people. But I think there are obviously ways that they’ve been doing some good outreach around that. But anyway, I really like the intergenerational aspect to it, and I feel like Ellen and Neil and Sally and some of the older members—not that they’re, you know, old—but it’s cool to hang out with people who are, they’re older than my parents, actually, generally around Mark’s parents ages. And just have a beer, hang out, and play this awesome music! [laughs] Go on their sailboats and all this crazy stuff that they have, that’s sort of afforded us some other opportunities to meet new and different kinds of people than we generally, than we’re usually hanging out with. (Jerri Wagner, in Wagner and Wagner interview 2005)

Jerri Wagner and Ellen Shriver both specifically mentioned how much they enjoyed having the opportunity to befriend people of different generations, and how rare that was for them outside of Old Town School.

Neil Donovan: Yeah, it was already developing, just because this school has a vibrant life. And the other thing, again, with what’s going on in the world today, you begin to worry about things, and you come to a place like this and you realize, there are … it sort of gives you faith that maybe it’s not as bad out there as you…[laughs]

Ellen Shriver: Maybe all those youngsters are just really not into hairstyles and TV. They actually do things. And I really value meeting younger people. And older people too, but certainly having a variety of age groups, I think that adds to the value. (Donovan and Shriver interview 2005)

As the Wagners pointed out to me, although the members of the jug band could not be counted among their closest friends after just a few months, with a weekly class/rehearsal and a steady stream of performing gigs, they were spending much more time with the jug band than with their usual friends, in spite of these generational differences (Wagner and Wagner interview 2005).
Although the spirit the Hump Night Thumpers took on was the result of the chemistry of the entire ensemble, the fact and form of its existence was entirely due to Arlo Leach. In his late twenties at the time I met him, Arlo grew up in Iowa—and his parents did indeed name him after Woody Guthrie’s son. “They were as much hippies as they can be in Iowa.” His father and grandfather were musicians, a trumpet player and a clarinetist respectively, playing in marching bands; it was a Music Man family, actually connected in some way to Meredith Wilson, the composer of that Broadway musical. He majored in music and English at Grinnell College in Iowa. “When I was in college, I decided that I wanted to at least try to be a full-time musician. I was playing in bands in college, and doing solo stuff, and I wanted to keep doing that because it was the best thing I had done to that point in my life. I wanted to try to make a career of it.”

After graduation, he moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where he met with modest success as a solo singer-songwriter playing in local coffeehouses, but realized after three years that he had exhausted the possibilities there and moved to Chicago—“just really for the opportunities for gigging,” an expectation the city easily met. Ironically, it was only then that he stopped seriously pursuing a full-time performing career. “As soon as I got to Chicago, I got interested in so many things about the city I kind of lost my passion for performing. And also living expenses were higher, so I got a day job, and I’ve had a regular day job ever since […] as a web developer” (Leach interview 2005).

He figures he probably learned about the Old Town School through the Chicago Reader.

I think I was intrigued just by the concept of a school of folk music[…] I was new in town, and I’m sure it seemed like just a chance to try something and meet people and see what’s going on here. And I had been playing harmonica, by the way, with my “act,” as it were. I never really learned it from anybody, so I thought that would be a good chance to solidify my skills there. (Leach interview 2005)

One of the classes he took was Dvorak’s Spontaneous Folk Ensemble.
Probably Mark Dvorak was the clincher, because that guy I think embodies folk music. He knows so many songs, and has such a wonderful approach to teaching. He’s just so open and supportive. He has a kind of a cult following that kind of attests to his charm as a teacher. So once I took his class, then I really started learning the true nature of the Old Town School, and the approach that a lot of the veteran teachers take, and the tradition that they’ve kind of brought up.

TL: So what did you find the nature of that tradition to be?

AL: Just anybody can play music, you don’t have to be special, you don’t have to go to a conservatory, you don’t have to have an innate talent, you just need a modestly priced instrument and some people to jam with, and you can do it[…]

TL: Was that a new approach for you?

AL: Sure. […] I grew up with music. It was always natural for me, but it was always pretty clear that other people didn’t play music – you did music or you didn’t. The idea of learning music as an adult, I think, would be really intimidating for a lot of people. Because I took piano lessons since I was in first grade and I knew music theory just intuitively from all that exposure. But the Old Town School is a place where adults who never read a note of music and never put a hand on an instrument can come in and learn and that’s really inspiring to me. (ibid.)

Arlo took a lot from Dvorak’s teaching philosophy, recognizing and reversing his own professionalist biases to work for maximum amateur access, an ideal that jug band music surely embodies. Yet his professional efficiency was still clearly in evidence in the way he ran classes and organized gigs; however enthusiastic and capable the students were for performing, it was Leach’s management and drive that made it possible for the Hump Night Thumpers to accomplish so much so quickly. “That’s Arlo. I mean, a couple of other people have gotten gigs for us, but that pushing, that pushing’s been all Arlo. He’s very good at that” (Parnell interview 2005). Sallie Gaines went further:

Arlo clearly places a very high premium on performance. He thinks—this is my opinion—he’s never said this—but I think Arlo almost views himself as a missionary who is going to teach a new generation of Americans about this lost piece of American history. And the only way you do that is you create teachers, i.e., a band, and we go out and we teach people. And so I think he views the
performance as a really, really important tool of the class. (Gaines and Keefe interview 2005)

Sallie’s perspective contrasts with the way Arlo described his own experience with the band, relative to his past beliefs about music. His leadership of the group, as I observed it, walked a fine line. The improvisatory exuberance of the group could contribute to an atmosphere of friendly anarchy, and even as he appreciated it, Leach often seemed to feel the need to rein it in, in order to make orderly progress through a rehearsal. “Arlo does always have this tension going between his desire to control, not so much people, but what will happen,” I noted at the time. “He’s uncomfortable with a ‘whatever’ attitude. At the same time, he is committed to the spirit of the jug band—improvisational, seat-of-the-pants, goofy fun” (Fieldnotes for September 28, 2005).

Like Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, the Jug Band class started out with, and retained at its core, a participatory ethos. In his teaching, Leach emphasized improvisation, not only in playing, but in instrument making. In the first class I attended, for example, after an introduction to the history of jug band music and personal introductions around the room, Leach had everyone try out kazoo solos over a twelve-bar blues progression, one at a time, experimenting with producing different timbres. He then asked us to acquire and/or make a jug or washtub bass for the next week, before moving on to the second half of the class, a rehearsal.

Although Leach did not intend for this class to become a performing ensemble, the group developed a distinctive personality so quickly, adopting a name Ellen suggested, “The Hump Night Thumpers,” during the first session, that within two months, they had arranged their first gig (Wagner and Wagner interview 2005). By spring, not only were they finding regular engagements, they had an invitation to compose and perform the theme song for a comedy show at the Playground Theater called “Don’t Spit the Water.” Arlo’s professional experience as a
performer and organizational energy, combined with his marketing skills (the Thumpers had their own website by their second session, complete with a logo designed by Arlo’s girlfriend and streaming audio and video) launched them into an intensifying calendar of bigger and bigger gigs with relative ease through the spring and summer.

Despite the wide range in the group members’ musical skills and experience, they seemed to thrive on performance—and to some degree, risk.

They weren’t even more experienced, they were more gutsy. [laughs] Like, willing to try anything. The class is actually kind of split between people who’ve played all their lives and those who’ve never played music before. And you can’t really tell by looking at them or hearing them play. […] But I think we have quite a good little group. And really, it’s the kind of music where you don’t want to be a virtuoso, you want to have spirit—that's more important. (Leach interview 2005)

Furthermore, by sheer chance, their abilities were complementary. “There was a serendipitous mixture of interests and talents. It wasn’t like everyone could just sing. Or everyone wanted to play washboard, or everyone wanted—people found strengths that complemented each other” (Gaines interview 2005).

This quick affinity for each other and for performing had a downside, as Sallie Gaines observed to me: it could be off-putting to new students, as it was, briefly, for her when she joined in the second session.

I was the only new person. Everyone there knew each other[….] You had all these people who had a history and a rhythm, I’m like, “Oh, great. This is really going to be an unpleasant experience.” And then Arlo says, “Well, man, we have a couple gigs.” My eyes I think must have gotten like saucers. I’m thinking, “Gigs! You gotta be kidding!” (Gaines interview 2005)

Certainly not everyone who signed up for the class invested themselves in the group, but the majority did, and this was in large part due to the commitment the group retained to a participatory ethos, despite their extensive performing goals; it was strongly felt that everyone
had to be included and had a role to play, even if it was just to keep time beating a pot with a spoon. Such a person might then be sent home with a couple of spoons and a rubber band with instructions on how to start learning to play the spoons. Meanwhile, Neil might be working on a guitar solo.

I love that jug band. And you know I think the longer we’re together, the more fun we have. I really like the jug band ‘cause nobody’s a prima donna in it. Nobody wants to do all the singing. Nobody wants to have every song. And if some part’s better for somebody else, somebody else is just willing to give it up. And I think that’s just so good. That’s so fun. And it’s fun for everybody to have something to do. You know? (Parnell interview 2005)

When the group was rehearsing for the Folk and Roots Festival, their biggest performance yet, during my third week with them, I was surprised at how inclusive they were even then.

I had expressed concern about performing with the group, as I don’t really have the songs down. I have been playing mandolin some of the time, but am not really on top of the chords yet, and had not, by Wednesday, gotten the singing down either. But the group was fairly unanimous in encouraging me to join in anyway—just hit something and sing along, or look like you’re singing along. (Fieldnotes for July 9, 2005)

As I watched the Hump Night Thumpers perform and then began performing with them myself, I increasingly sensed that the audience was reacting as much to the group’s infectious sense of enjoyment in each other’s musical company—in the just plain fun—as to the groove, energy, and humor of the songs. The next performance I joined them for was on a Tuesday evening at the Winds Café in the Logan Square neighborhood—a fairly ordinary bar and restaurant in a young, hip and gentrifying neighborhood. It was my first opportunity to observe a non-OTSFM audience for the jug band.

The audience did not, of course, know what to expect, and for the most part probably were not there with the intention of being an audience. […] They seemed to get right into it, no problem. Almost immediately, there was a vibe in the room—a relaxed enjoyment, head-bobbing, smiles, amusement. (We were certainly very amusing, both in song content and our stage presence.) But I never sensed anything derogatory. You might think someone in your average bar (and
this did seem to be an average bar, within the Logan Square context) would want
to scoff at a kazoo band, but folks seemed to take it in stride. We got great
response in terms of applause and cheers, but of course that would have been
skewed by our little fan club [of band members’ friends]. I seem to recall even
taking audience suggestions for the improvised verses. The music really did get
people involved. (Fieldnotes for August 9, 2005)

Energized by success at the Winds Café, the group decided to go straight to the Abbey
Pub on Elston Avenue that night for its weekly open mike night—something they had talked
about doing but had not yet done.

It had already started when we got there, but Arlo put us on the MC’s queue right
away. Three songs per act, limit. There were clear rules, it seemed. Except that
we kept not coming up on the queue, and it got later and later, and we started to
suspect that known quantities were getting priority[....] The acts were 100%
guitar-based, some electric, most acoustic. Most were solo, I believe. Several
were songwriters doing original material.

Finally, after some nudging from Arlo, we were up. We had picked out our three
tunes, three solid old favorites, but after our first one (probably either “Rag
Mama” or “Mobile Line”), the MC immediately gestured to us to do four tunes!
What was left of the audience at that hour was very enthusiastic, and afterwards a
number of people came up independently to compliment us and ask us who we
were, where we played, if we’d be back, etc[....] Got home very late. (Fieldnotes
for August 9, 2005)

Over and over, in my interviews with individuals in this group, the word “fun” came up.

“I like to perform,” Polly Parnell told me. “I like to have fun. I wouldn’t want to do it five nights
a week, but I think it’s fun. Why take a class if you can’t go out and show everybody what
you’re doing? And everybody’s so laid back, you make a mistake, big deal” (Parnell interview
2005). Even Arlo, who never lost sight of his goal to teach people to be independent musicians,
found that that was increasingly not his primary motivation.

I realized that for me playing with other people is the most important thing about
music. It was frustrating to realize that I’d been playing solo for a long time. So
one thing the jug band has given me is a fabulous group of people to play with.
Don’t tell them this, but I’d do it for free. [laughs] [....] They’re fun to play with,
and it gives to me what I want to get out of music, the joy of putting what you can
do together with what someone else can do. [....] For once in my life, I don’t want
them to be totally independent because I want to keep playing with them. (Leach interview 2005)

Though the Hump Night Thumpers grew from roots in the Spontaneous Folk Clan, by the end of their first year, they had become much more like the Beatles Ensemble in their creative combination of three of Turino’s four fields. The songs and style they played were accessible only through recordings—old and unrefined, but commercial. And while they neither sought to mimic those old performances, nor limit their repertoire to only those, they were utterly indebted to them; they had no living source to turn to besides other (mostly) white revivalists like themselves. Organizing themselves as a presentational ensemble, they aggressively pursued and rehearsed for performing opportunities, where they presented participatory possibility to the audience, with their ridiculously unprofessional instruments and infectious sense of irreverent fun. “Anybody can do this,” their performances said. “Why not you, too?”

The Jug Band Ensemble had begun with a strong commitment to participatory music making, later enhanced and, from some perspectives, compromised by its passion for presentational performance. The Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, however, along with the Grafton Folk Club and the Pickin’ Bubs (although the latter also prepared presentational performances on the side), consistently adhered to the practices and aesthetics of purely participatory music making; the musicians’ attentions were always focused entirely on each other. This required that Dvorak, as the teacher, patiently train musicians—whether novice or experienced—in skills often neglected in other music environments: learning by ear, improvising arrangements (even at a very basic technical level), and most importantly, good manners. Perhaps the most essential element to successful participatory musical experiences is the development of appropriate social behavior, of type uncommon in American urban society, where personal ego and competitive judgment of others take a distant backseat to collective pleasure. Through modeled behavior and
subtle direction, the members of this clan supported each other in learning, nurturing and internalizing these habits.
CHAPTER 9

MUSICAL CLANS, MUSICAL FRIENDSHIPS II:
PRESENTATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCE IN THE
BEATLES ENSEMBLE CLAN

Introduction

Bryan Yanaga described this 1999 Beatles Ensemble performance at a scholarship fundraiser as “the highlight of my time in the ensemble, and there were many”:

The ensembles were invited, and we closed the show. And we were going to play the second side of the Abbey Road album, in its entirety. And so the show’s going on and, you know, the side opens up with the song “Here Comes the Sun.” And there had already been three versions of “Here Comes the Sun” done during the show. They were all different, none of them were actually like the record, but they were all very good. So we get up there, and again, we barely fit on stage. I mean actually [demonstrating in the empty classroom we were in]—this carpet’s the stage, I’m like right here, facing the audience, I’m literally like one step off the stage. I mean, what the heck is this, right? There were more people on the stage than in the audience—which is pretty common with the ensemble, actually.

So we start doing “Here Comes the Sun.” […] But then, you know, the drums kick in, and all the guitars kick in—[the audience is thinking,] “Oh, this is, like, the actual arrangement”—and we nailed it. It was great. We got a nice round of applause. Then we go right into the next song, and it’s like, “Oh! This is the next song on Abbey Road! That’s kind of cool.” So we finish that song and do the next song. “Oh, this is interesting.” And suddenly, about four songs into it, they realize, “Hey! They’re doing the whole album!” And every time the songs—’cause Abbey Road’s like one big medley, right? The songs just blend with each other. And every time we went from one song to another there was a palpable rise in excitement. Because we did it exactly as it was on the album. And if we had stopped between the songs and, you know, gotten applause and this and that, it wouldn’t have been the same. So I think paying attention to those little things actually make a difference in terms of how Beatles fans appreciate us. (Yanaga interview 2005)

His account gets to the heart of the Beatles ensemble’s extraordinarily broad appeal, to participants and audiences alike. The Beatles Ensemble present performances of participation on stage, performances created through participatory principles where every one of the absurd number of individuals on stage has a role to play, and yet which evoke for the audience the
uniquely twentieth-century pleasure of listening to studio art, ultimately encouraging them to imagine their own participation. Many of the Beatles Ensemble members, like Judy Davis, were originally inspired to join in just this way.

Well, one of my best Beatle memories really probably is the initial awe of seeing Beatles perform for the first time, Beatles Ensemble. They were doing Help! And I mean, just sitting in the audience and realizing, “I can be part of that. I can have that kind of fun. You know, this is just overwhelming. To realize, This is for me, and I’m gonna do it!” (Davis interview 2005)

The Beatles Ensemble was the largest and longest continuously offered class at the Old Town School in 2005 (and probably still is), so large that it was nearly an institution unto itself. Deep friendships, and at least one marriage, have emerged from this little world, as well as a number of smaller, more Beatles-sized gigging bands. Beatles Ensemble members also crossed over frequently between several other ensembles taking a similar approach to popular music of a roughly the same vintage, like the Grateful Dead Ensemble, the Soul Ensemble, and the Floating Rock Ensemble.

**Recording-Based Clans**

At the same time that newly structured ensemble classes oriented towards a purely participatory mode of music making were evolving into social clans, an entirely different sort of ensemble was also beginning to flourish in the 1990s: ensemble classes based on rock and other popular music, named for specific bands (or even recording studios) and structured around record albums, who enjoyed performing on stage at the School—and beyond, when possible.

The phenomenon started in the late 1980s in what might be considered a “folk music” corner. “Well, I guess I’m kind of responsible for that, thank you!” Jimmy Tomasello told me. He had tried a Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan class, but quickly began following the folk-rock evolution
of the 1960s, transforming it into a Dylan-only class, which naturally became more rock-oriented, then adding a Grateful Dead Ensemble.¹ Using an album as the course syllabus was, given the listening habits of “the rock-n-roll generation” (to which Jimmy and most of his students belonged), again quite natural.

The album thing, though, I had a room full of people and I had no idea—not full of people, there was about eleven people, this Bob Dylan class, and I brought in some songs. I’d been doing this, bringing in a pile of songs that I felt like, you know, playing. And teaching. And I had this pile with me, and I thought, no. We’re just gonna do an album. So we did these songs, and I said, “You know what we’re gonna do in this class, this session, is we’re gonna take the album Street Legal, and we’re gonna do it from cover to cover.” Boom. And then Steve came along and started doing that with the Beatles, too. (ibid.)

When Steve Levitt returned to OTSFM in the early 1990s to teach, Tomasello had been successfully running the Grateful Dead Ensemble and the Dylan Ensemble for a few years, as well as a class called “Unplugged Acoustic Styles,” building on the popularity of Eric Clapton’s 1992 Unplugged album; “I was teaching people how to take rock songs and play them on acoustic guitar. And that was very popular” (Tomasello interview 2005b). Levitt wanted to try his hand at something similar. The School was by then running a number of classes based on specific performers (Levitt tried out Simon and Garfunkel, Joni Mitchell and James Taylor), and most were intended to be taken only once. At the same time, however, Tomasello’s Dylan Ensemble was creating a new formula for an ongoing group, what Levitt calls a “self-activated class.” “They were performing, and they had a strong core of people who were meeting outside it. So most of the structures that I saw that make it for class like that, I’d already seen” (Levitt interview 2005a). Of course the Old Time Ensemble was also beginning to “self-activate” around this time, but neither Levitt nor Tomasello mentioned this parallel, perhaps because it

¹ Both are still being offered in 2010-11; Tomasello is still teaching the Dylan Ensemble, but Steve Levitt has taken over the Dead.
was not rooted in the guitar program, or perhaps because the social and musical circles were so
distinct that it didn’t strike them as comparable. Meanwhile, Levitt was also teaching a class that
came to be called “Guitar 17.”

They were just a coalesced group of humans who liked playing together and liked
me, and we just decided to stay together. So after [Guitar] 4 Rep was over, we
just still wanted to do something, and Michael Miles was running the show at that
point, and was enormously responsive to all these sorts of little mutations going
on. Said, “Well, we’ll just set it up outside of the thing there.” So we did, and it
was very successful. Those people, I still see ‘em around the School, and they’re
still hanging together and still playing together, so. Fabulously successful. (Levitt
interview 2005a)

With these examples to build from, Levitt started the Beatles Ensemble in about 1996. “Of
course that was, like, out of control from the get-go” (Tomasello interview 2005b).

Rock- and pop-based ensembles proliferated over the next ten years. “I invented the
Floating Rock Ensemble, which was an ensemble that would take care of all those great disks
and groups that couldn’t sustain a thing like the Beatles or the Dylan Ensemble, or the Dead”
(Levitt interview 2005a). By 2005, Levitt had taught twenty-eight iterations of the Floating
Rock Ensemble, which had covered classics like Fleetwood Mac’s Rumours and Pink Floyd’s
Dark Side of the Moon, among many others. Albums had to have a built-in following to be
successful, however; the one Floating Rock session that didn’t run due to low enrollment was on
a 1967 album by the short-lived psychedelic band Love, a personal fascination of Levitt’s which
no one else had heard of, apparently.

Other particularly successful Floating Rock sessions took on the Band (the 1970s group
headed by Robbie Robertson) and alternative country rock band Wilco, a Chicago group

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2 “We’d had the idea of playing Dark Side of the Moon while Wizard of Oz played on the screen,
we were gonna play the soundtrack — ‘cause you know the whole issue with that. And so we
were totally into it. But it, you know, eight weeks. We simply could not get it quite together like
that. So what we did was, we flashed slides of different stills from the movie, as we did
different songs. It was very cool” (Levitt interview 2005a).
garnering critical acclaim nationally in the early 2000s; Wilco was extremely popular among
twenty-something students at the Old Town School during the period I was there. “Wilco and the Band are sort of clanistically related,” Levitt observed to me.

And they were a very strong clan. And they liked it so much that we actually spun off of the Floating Rock Ensemble, and that became the No Depression Ensemble. Which had a heyday and lasted for a couple of years. And then it was like...they wanted to go out and gig more. And I could not go with them, quite that way. (Levitt interview 2005a)

Through connections Levitt had to members of Wilco (the original band), the No Depression Ensemble had the opportunity to perform the opening bar act at a Wilco CD release party, and were actually joined by Wilco musicians onstage.

And to me, it’s like, that set a standard for how an ensemble should be. It’s kind of hard to live up to that every session[...]. It was very cool. I think it was a highlight of their musical scene. And the group that spun off of the No Depression Ensemble, and took on a name, they call themselves Roger, for Roger Wilco, and they continue to hang. So that was successful. (ibid.)

Not all ensembles had a single leader. The Soul Ensemble presented an alternate, collaborative model. Originally started by Tomasello as the Motown Ensemble, it had become Bill Brickey and Alton Smith’s rather broader vehicle by the time of my fieldwork. Smith had “this huge background in choir directing, and he is also a pianist, and had some really good skills notating, both lead sheets and standard notation he can do—plus he knows the genre. And it was a really good relationship, and has been so far,” while Bill’s strengths were as a singer and guitarist with a gift for expression, musically and verbally. “Mostly, what happens is that they get a lot of structure from Alton and a lot of spirit from me[...]. Alton can do it, but I don’t think that he can explain what it is that he’s doing, not without being technical. And I’m a motivator.”

The Soul Ensemble prominently featured individual expression, unlike Levitt’s and Tomasello’s ensembles, which tended to present a more collective identity, with even lead vocals sung by
multiple individuals at once, even as both drew on the same fan enthusiasm for popular recorded music. “So the ensemble energy is Fantasy Island. That’s what it is. People go to Fantasy Island, and all of a sudden, they’re Aretha Franklin.” Brickey found that persuading students to find their own voices was one of his greater challenges in the ensemble; he told his students, “It’s unlikely that you’re gonna be able to do it exactly the way that Aretha did it. And in some respect, I don’t want you doing it that way.’ And this speaks to my problem with the ensembles. This exactness. You know, that we will do it the way that they did it” (Brickey interview 2005b).

Taking popular records as the starting point for these ensembles attracts students with different musical values, different aspirations, than those who are drawn to the participatory ones. Brickey had some trouble adapting to this when he first started teaching the Soul Ensemble.

BB: Steve Levitt said to me, “well you know, people who join ensembles, they’re a little bit different than other people.” And I was like, did he really mean that?

TL: What did he mean by that?

BB: What he meant, is that in an ensemble, you tend to get—they’re not all that way, of course—you tend to get people who are…anal. They want it written down. They’re here to learn the style. They want to learn the work specifically of someone else. It’s less about learning to play the instrument that it is about playing style. You might almost say that this is where the egos are[…] and unless you are strong musically, to lead egos like that is very difficult. (Brickey interview 2005b)

The challenge in teaching these ensembles was to translate fans’ loyalty and love for the sound objects in their memories into creative performance in the moment, within the spirit of the Old Town School’s participatory ethos.
The Beatles Ensemble Clan

*History and Overview.* Steve Levitt started offering the Beatles Ensemble class in 1996 as one of the earlier rock/band ensemble classes.

I’ve never had anything happen to me like what happened to me with the Beatles Ensemble. I mean, I’ve had activated classes. I’d had coalesced groups of committed, dedicated, cool humans. And what happened with the Beatles was like a very large version of that. A very large group of very cool, very committed and connected-together people. Who just got together over the Beatles music. (Levitt interview 2005a)

Bryan Yanaga was an early member of the class. A thirty-something physician who already played guitar—“you know, just sort of noodling around the house”—when he signed up for Guitar 4 that year, giving the Beatles Ensemble a try later that year in its third session. He joined for the simple reason that the Beatles was his favorite group, although he was only six years old when they made their American debut on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1964. In 2005, although he was no longer registering for the class or coming to rehearsals very often, he still considered himself a member—regularly playing in gigs, going to Beatles Camp, and generally socializing with the group (Yanaga interview 2005).

Generally, the format of the class was to learn one Beatles album over the course of each eight-week session (though other structures were tried over the years) cycling through the complete Beatles oeuvre several times. The class was popular from the beginning—unsurprising, given the popularity of the Beatles. At the Armitage location in the mid-1990s, twelve to fifteen students was considered a large enrollment.

It started out and there was probably a core of maybe eight or nine people, we always kind of repeated. Toward the end it actually got pretty crowded. First day of class, we’d have, twenty-five people, and then a third of them would get scared off, it was so big. So we always had like fifteen or so. But it was already becoming crowded. When we moved here, we had a little more room. A lot more people signed up and stayed on. (Yanaga interview 2005)
Amy Rasmussen, who joined in 1998, recalled, “It wasn't like it is now. It was just a class. It really was just a class. [...] The first Beatles class I was in, there were probably ten people, if that. It just sort of grew and grew and grew. It wasn't like it is today” (Rasmussen interview 2005).

Just after the Old Town School’s 1998 move to Lincoln Square, something began to happen to the group’s chemistry. Its sudden growth was fueled by the same factors that fed the School’s overall explosion in size—the publicity generated by the move and the capacity of the new facility—but the Beatles Ensemble experienced an even more extraordinary surge, resulting in a unique synergy between their new accessibility and the specific personalities already involved.

It happened in 1999, people started to come. It was an *Abbey Road* session, actually, the same one that we’re studying now, maybe the first time the ensemble, as an ensemble, ever looked at it. We did the back side of the album. And they just clicked. Everybody in the class clicked. It was as though we had reached some critical mass. That you would never know was there unless you had actually reached critical mass. And I got there, and I realized that these people were...bonding. I mean bonding, like community bonding, like lifetime bonding, right in front of my eyes, left and right, with me and with each other. (Levitt interview 2005a)

It was around this time that the fundraiser performance Yanaga recounted at the beginning of this section occurred. Amy Rasmussen identified this event in particular as a turning point: “That was a huge gain for us[....] We did the backside of *Abbey Road*, and they went crazy.” Terri Hemmert, a well-known rock DJ for WXRT radio who hosted morning a Beatles show, had organized and emceed this event, and her approbation of the performance as “the whole glamorous spokesperson,” made a big impression on Rasmussen, not to mention others in attendance. “Three or four people came up to me afterward, and were like ‘we wanna join, how do we get involved?’ So I think that just by playing out, the ensemble has gotten people attracted to it” (Rasmussen interview 2005).
A new energy took hold of the group at this point. It played out musically, and through the pleasure of better music, drew in more members.

I think the ensemble started getting popular when the core group started getting a little more proficient. What I mean is that, now we know all of these little nuances and background parts and vocal parts. So you can walk in, start singing “Help!” or whatever, and suddenly all this stuff is behind you. And you’ve got a whole band behind you and now you’re the lead singer singing the song, and there’s that part, there’s that part and there’s a little lick there, and this is pretty cool! How can you not enjoy that? So I think that gets people to stay, and then as the social ties kind of strengthen, then...then they’re in the “cult” [tongue in cheek, TL laughs] (Yanaga interview 2005)

A new email list created the foundation for a Beatles Ensemble that was a social and musical entity beyond the classroom, facilitating the planning of outside performances and get-togethers and keeping past students connected.

The Beatles Ensemble was coming to be recognized (uneasily, by some) within the Old Town School as a phenomenon of note; there had never been a class that behaved quite like this, and Levitt was breaking new ground in attempting to guide it.

So I thought, well, first do no harm, right? I mean, there was no manual for this one. There wasn’t anybody at the School that could tell me. Michael [Miles] was interested. Jimmy [Tomasello] was interested. Other people didn’t really even know what was going on, I think. So, I thought, well, I think this is kind of cool. Let’s see what, you know...maybe if I just get out of the way, and let things happen and don’t try and do anything, things’ll go very well for a while. We’ll see how this goes. (Levitt interview 2005a)

By the time I joined the ensemble in April 2005, the Beatles Ensemble was enrolling about forty students each session, divided between a main Wednesday evening section and a much smaller Saturday afternoon section, with a total of about eighty people on the email list, any of whom might appear for any given gig or social event. The majority of members seemed to be between the ages of about thirty-five and sixty, but there were many younger members as well, including a couple of high school students. A variety of walks of life were represented,
married and single people, parents and the child-free, but with the exception of a couple of Asian Americans, everyone I encountered was white. The group entertained a full calendar of gigs that summer, an average of nearly one a week, though I was told that this pace was not maintained year-round; summer brought more opportunities, like Chicago’s many neighborhood street fairs and other outdoor venues. My two sessions with the group covered the albums *Let It Be Naked*³ and *Abbey Road*, and concluded with an all-day potluck and concert in August at which all of OTSFM’s rock ensembles played full sets, held at one student’s summer home on Fox Lake, northwest of the city.

Although leadership of the group was in many respects shared, Steve Levitt was the central figure, as the teacher and music director, and was fundamentally responsible for the particular commitment to kindness that pervaded social interactions in the ensemble. Levitt was born in Chicago in 1952 to a Jewish/Catholic “kind of lefty” couple, and has lived there most of his life. “My parents were both psychiatrists. So I’m kinda half Freudian, half…anti-Freudian […] I don’t know how to classify myself. I’m sure I’m very classifiable, though[…] I think my classification is to not be classified. It’s one of those weird little spirals.” The product of a highly educated family, and inclined towards intellectual introspection himself, Levitt did not pursue formal education to the extent he probably could have. “I think it was probably assumed that I was going to be a doctor. That sort of thing. But [pause] it just never took. And music was just for some reason always there, keeping me around its parameters. So there wasn’t really any other choice” (Levitt interview 2005c).

³ *Let It Be Naked* was Paul McCartney’s 2003 re-release of the 1970 *Let It Be* album, stripped of the orchestral overdubs and other enhancements added by producer Phil Spector, which McCartney disapproved of.
Levitt’s parents were music lovers who enjoyed a variety of musics popular with their class and time: jazz, classical music favorites, movie soundtracks, the Weavers—“I just seemed to enjoy pretty much all of it,” Steve recalled. He was given piano lessons as a child, in the standard classical mold. “I did not impress anybody with a hint of things to come, if you will. I just played. I took lessons. I wasn’t particularly gifted. I didn’t feel like I advanced all that much.” It was standard, reading-based, method-book instruction, “but I was very ear-oriented all the time, and I would often memorize it before I would—it was easier to memorize it than read it. Played from ear, I could just do it. So I never worked very hard or diligently at my traditional skills.” Levitt does not believe his parents had considered that he would have a career in music. “I don’t think it ever occurred to them that I had the storytelling rights to do that. You know what I mean. There’s a certain authority that you get from being a certain way or from a certain place[...] I certainly had the storytelling rights to be a medical professional, a healer of some kind. But all that was pressed through the sieve of the late 1960s, early 1970s and it just came out in unexpected ways” (Levitt interview 2005c).

During a piano hiatus when Levitt was in middle school, “guitar kind of snuck in there.” The Levitts actually lived near the Old Town School, “up the street off of North Avenue,” and Steve knew Win Stracke’s television program for children well.

So, when that moment happened and I said I wanted guitar lessons, I think it was the natural place to go. It was in the area, it was known. It was politically correct. They had no kid programs, though. I just went. I walked in there, saw Win Stracke. I said, “I like your TV show.” He said, “Cool.” They gave me to Ray Tate. I did a private lesson with him. Was not very successful. I didn’t really want private lessons. Figured I could do the group lessons. ‘Cause, sit in the middle of the whole thing, make no waves at all. And that’s what I did. (Levitt interview 2005c)

He took a few months of classes in 1965, enough to get as far as bar chords (probably what was then the “intermediate” level) and then went off to join a rock and roll band, and
continued in this vein, though he did return to the Old Town School in 1969 or 1970 to take a
banjo class. There was no moment of epiphany when Steve decided to become a musician
professionally; it’s just what he did. “I was drawn to performing, so I became drawn to the idea
of playing bars. I went to school in St. Louis and the idea that you could get paid for playing
was…attractive! And life looked very different then. It was possible to survive on very little
amount of money.” He has always been able to support himself as a musician, somehow or
other. “I’ve had many odd jobs and had many [pause] years when it was low, low, low. But,
yeah! It’s been a source of income. And something I was somewhat driven to do! That was as a
performer” (Levitt interview 2005c).

I asked him if he’d wanted to “make it big.” As he often did, he answered more than I’d
asked, drawing me into a meditation on the nature of fame:

SL: Mmm, still do, yeah, I think probably. Or, I suppose in a way I feel I have, so. I do not know exactly how much bigger I could take it. [TL chuckles] Without an entourage. [pause] I’m curious about fame. Both the little taste of it that I’ve seen here and there, and the price to pay to get what you want. It’s an interesting abyss to look into.

TL: Something that has been attractive to you at least at times?

SL: Well…I’m a kind of a bungee jumper there. [TL and SL laugh]

TL: You come back up?

SL: Yeah, I like to just kind of bounce down and look, a little ways down and make sure I was zapped back up into safety of anonymity. [TL laughs] Freedom is the issue, isn’t it really?

TL: Yeah.

SL: And you know, there’s a cross-curve. If you’re anonymous, you’re just a little person just working on your interesting little things, you have a great deal of freedom. And then soon as you want the stuff that does that, there’s a—you actually give up a lot of that. And then, your success, they sort of give it back to you. So with enough success in that area, you get your freedom back, and that thing. And it’s the in-between thing that everybody wrestles with, right? What
will you give up, holding out for the promise of freedom and economic success
and this and that? What’s that gonna look like? And it’s a great question. Great,
great question. (Levitt interview 2005c)

Levitt returned to Chicago in 1976, after a few years studying and playing in St. Louis,
and got a gig playing with Ravenswood, the professional centennial band that was attached to the
Old Town School for a year or two (see Chapter 4). “I overplayed like hell, ‘cause I didn’t know
what the hell I was doing, but that was a great group of musicians […] We were pulling $800 a
month, that was [snaps fingers four times] big-time!” The band’s repertoire was a motley
pastiche of Americana, so each member tended to specialize in a style or mood; “I had my
Catfish John…sort of grizzled, I had sort of a grizzled point of view even then, so I took the
grizzled tunes” (Levitt interview 2005c).

After Ravenswood disbanded, Levitt ended up playing with other bands in the Old Town
School orbit, Redhead and After the Storm, a “seventies rocker quartet thing” more organically
composed mostly of people who taught at the School. After that, Steve joined Freewheel, “this
awesome country act, that rocked and played from nine to four in the morning, these guys, you
know, every night. And they were just—in terms of chops and sturdiness, they were just playing
so much, they really were happening.” This was in the period of the late 1970s when urban
country music was popular. “I was not from a country background or anything, but it
was…happening there.” The longer Steve stayed with Freewheel, the less “categorizable” it
became. The band ended around the time he left for Florida with his wife (Levitt interview
2005c).

Levitt has not since placed performing at the center of his career, but has never stopped
performing with one band or another. At the time of my fieldwork, he was playing regularly
with OTSFM guitar teachers Bill Brickey and Jimmy Tomasello in a band named BLT, for their
initials. Although all three had taught at the Old Town School since the late 1980s or early 1990s, and Levitt had known Tomasello since the 1960s, they did not start playing together until 1999 when, at a graduation at Second Half, “for no reason at all […] we just got up on stage and played a tune. And it just clicked.”

In 1993, after only a couple of years in Florida, he returned to Chicago and, once again, landed at the Old Town School, where he started teaching, an uninterrupted tenure to the present day. His first teaching job was not guitar however; he broke in with a couple of group classes in autoharp (TL: “I wasn’t expecting that!” SL: “Neither was anyone connected with autoharp, I’m sure” [Levitt interview 2005a]). Since then, he has taught the guitar core (see Chapter 7) and an intriguing course in the mid-1990s he called “Organic Songbook,” which probably contributed to Levitt’s unique approach to explaining the music theory in the context of the Beatles, which many of his students pointed out to me. The twin goals of the class were to teach songwriting and playing by ear; fundamentally, it was about musical creativity.

How do you make your own music? You need to make your own music. So how do you do that? How do people do that? Some people just sit down and play. Other people have no idea how one is supposed to do that. And they’ll look on people who sit down and just start strumming chords as if they’ve gone mad or they’ve gone genius or something. What is that little quality and how do you foster that in humans? (Levitt interview 2005a)

He felt it was a successful class, but the growing demands of the ensemble classes prevented him from teaching it again, or, in fact, developing any other course offerings. “Takes all my time. No, I wouldn’t have it any other way. […] And I find oddly enough that that’s very, very satisfying as a social scene for me. Works just great” (Levitt interview 2005c).

A Beatles education. The Wednesday night Beatles Ensemble class was one of the less instruction-oriented classes I attended at the Old Town School. It was primarily a rehearsal, peppered with pedagogical moments. Like the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, the Beatles
Ensemble met in the Gallery; unlike SFE, this group made the room seem small. Class began at 8:00 pm, with musicians arriving to set up their gear fifteen, even thirty minutes in advance.

There were often two drummers, each with their own drum kit, and many of the guitars were electric, plugged into portable amplifiers. For the two sessions I joined, there was usually someone at the upright piano. It was not feasible for everyone to sit in a chair, and the electric bass players (sometimes as many as four or five) and many of the guitar players stood. Given the social exuberance of the Beatles Ensemble in general, literally amplified by the equipment, it was challenging, to say the least, for Steve Levitt to manage the group and steer it through a productive hour-and-a-half agenda. I noted at the time:

> When things get noisy and too many people are noodling while he’s talking (especially that teenage boy on the bass), he’s very good at getting people to quiet down and focus very quickly. Everything is very organized and flows at a good clip without ever losing the sense of casual fun—musically and jokingly—and without ever losing track of what the least skilled musicians need to know. (Fieldnotes for May 4, 2005)

Several students mentioned to me how much they admired his ability to control the group, yet avoid seeming to discipline anyone. “I think he’s like a master teacher, I think the guy’s unreal. The fact that you can sit in the class and have people that can barely play and people that can whip out any solo at any time, and somehow he can keep that interesting for everybody, I think that’s a huge thing, to be able to teach like that” (Cohen interview 2005).

According to the catalog, the Beatles Ensemble was open to “all fab instruments and vocalists” (OTSFM Adult Class Catalog, January-April 2005); in practice, it appealed primarily to guitar students, and when asked, Levitt would recommend Guitar 2 Rep as a prerequisite, a lower bar for entry than many ensembles. The majority of students seemed to have taken at least one guitar class at the School prior to signing up, though it was certainly possible to start out at OTSFM with the Beatles Ensemble (Marla Cohen, for example, did so after taking private guitar
lessons elsewhere). Steve was consistently welcoming and encouraging of anyone who could conceivably benefit from playing with the ensemble. After Judy Davis was inspired by a Beatles Ensemble performance to join, she approached Levitt.

I thought, I can do that! If I can get it together with my guitar playing. At that point I’d been playing like four or five months only. So after the set, I went up to Steve Levitt, and I said, “I have got to be a part of this.” And he laughed. I said, “But I’ve only been taking guitar like five months.” I said, “What do you think?” He said, “Join up!” And I was way in over my head. Way, way, way, way over my head when I joined. But eventually it all came together. (Davis interview 2005)

Davis found Levitt just as encouraging when she began to branch out. Although she had had never played an instrument before taking up guitar in her mid-forties (inspired by her own boredom while sitting outside her son’s piano lessons at OTSFM), less than two years later, she started to learn to play the cello.

And I brought in the cello—I didn’t say—and this is the wonderful thing about Steve. You show up with another instrument, he doesn’t question you. And you know you’re not going to be questioned. You walk in, you sit down, you’ve got a different instrument. He doesn’t even point it out in the beginning. And everybody starts top play and this and that, and then about three songs into it, he looks at me and he goes “So, what song are we playing for you, Judy?” And I said, “Fool on the Hill.” And he said, “Great! Fool on the Hill.” So we all played “Fool on the Hill,” and he gave me the OK sign and nodded, and then as we got up to leave class, he goes, “You know, that was great. But I was looking for you to play ‘Walrus.’” And I said, “‘Walrus’?” I said, “Oh, that is really advanced.” He said, “Yeah, but you could just learn the beginning.” (Davis interview 2005)

Davis did learn the cello part for “I Am the Walrus”—or at least a simplified version, which her teenaged son helped her work out—leading her to start private cello lessons and join a community orchestra co-founded by fellow Beatle Amy Rasmussen.

Jenny Peel, who had joined the Ensemble in 2000, commented on Levitt’s commitment to individual student development.
The one thing that stands out about Steve from many other instructors I’ve had is, he’s really vested in the student and giving something to the student and seeing them grow. It’s like, he could look at each one of us and kind of have in mind what he thinks the next step for us would be in order to grow as a musician or performer. He’s very fostering and very nurturing. (Peel interview 2005)

This kind of encouragement to play applied to veterans as much as beginners. In other class settings, an unregistered former student might be just as uncertain of his welcome as a newcomer, but Levitt explicitly welcomed old members.

And the Beatles emeritus, meaning the graduated or elder members of the Beatles Ensemble, was one of the things that I thought that I should make every effort possible to keep those people in the community, when they were not able to take a class, or had taken all the Beatles that they were gonna take for a while. I wanted them to stay in touch. I wanted them to come back and visit. I thought it was important to keep that in there and slip the new Beatles Ensemble members—and it was as early as 4 years ago, they’re now the emeritus—to let them see that, that would be how I would treat them too. (Levitt interview 2005a)

Of course, the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble had a similar unofficial policy, in that students familiar with the class concept could drop in any time, registered or not, but they were not considered “members” in the same sense, nor were they formally kept in communication with current students. Not only did the Beatles Ensemble extend a permanent invitation to join rehearsals and gigs to all members, irrespective of registration status, but musical participation could feel nearly mandatory if one did make an appearance. During a Saturday class I attended, someone stopped by without a guitar.

He was obviously a veteran Beatle and said he’d come on the spur of the moment. Steve asked him where his guitar was in that way that almost makes you think he’s going to get disciplinary about it, but actually he’s just being adamant that everyone plays, that everyone will get help. So he got [him] a guitar in short order—a crappy looking black guitar in the corner with red viney flowers painted on the front. Much hilarity. (Fieldnotes for July 30, 2005)

The structure of the class varied somewhat, as the group experimented with different ways to break up the recorded oeuvre of the Beatles (and to some extent, the solo work of the
individual Beatles). Levitt found that “their stuff structures itself: you can go albums, you can go eras, you can go personalities.” In 2001, for example, they tried an all-George session, playing nothing but songs by Harrison during the period when he was dying of cancer; Lennon was also given a session, but by 2005 they had yet to do a McCartney session. At one point, they tried a couple of “what-if” sessions, where they played solo works of the individual Beatles, imagining what a post-1970 Beatles album might have been like. There was a longer period in the early 2000s when the class, already quite large, was broken up into four subgroups of nine or ten people each, each of which was assigned a Beatles period to work on, named after songs with women’s names representative of each period: Lizzie (early), Lucy (middle), Julia (late), and Jet (post). Each group had its own leader and rehearsed its own songs. “I moved up a step, I was the instructor’s instructor,” Levitt explained, “which I thought was fabulous[...] Everyone had to take on more responsibility, which was a good thing, because a lot of the skills you learn in the Beatles Ensemble, you can’t really use in Beatles Ensemble in its complete form. It’s too big. Breaking up solved that problem. It was a great model” (Levitt interview 2005a).

The Beatles albums remained the central text, however. When I joined for the Let It Be Naked session, it was the penultimate session to the third full cycle of all the Beatles’ albums in chronological order. They cycled through the American and British releases separately, as the albums had different contents, especially in the early years, and would also treat remixed albums separately as in the session I played in. They also devoted sessions to various re-compiled releases like Past Masters (1988), and the “Red” and “Blue” albums (1962-1966 and 1967-1970, respectively [1973]).
One significant way that the Beatles Ensemble class differed from other OTSFM classes was the fact that there was a long-term plan in place, not just for the eight weeks, but for as long as two or three years in the future, as Janet Sayre pointed out to me.

When you walk in, on the first night, you definitely know there’s a plan. Like you’re gonna get, you’re probably handed [...] the whole package of an album, and this is what you’re gonna do for the next eight weeks. So you know. Here it is. This is what we’re gonna do. And we’re gonna at least end with a graduation, and maybe you’re gonna, like, every week also have a gig! So there’s a structure that there isn’t in most of the other classes. [...] So for the past two and a half years, not only did you have that small structure, but you had the larger structure of knowing, this is what we’re doing, and we’re doing the British releases in chronological order. (Sayre interview 2005)

Sayre acknowledged a spectrum of willingness to plan among ensemble teachers. “In the Old Time Ensemble, you don’t know what you’re gonna do. The teacher doesn’t know what he’s gonna do. Till he walks in the door, you know? What tune…So each class is a more isolated experience than Beatles.” Other classes, however, did have an eight-week plan, and the album structure was fairly common among other rock ensembles.

“But I don’t know of anyone else has that long-range goal[...] No other class has that, no other class has a two-and-a-half-year plan!” (ibid.).

Format notwithstanding, there was no intention in the early years of reproducing the actual arrangements on the Beatles recordings; it was originally conceived as basically a guitar class, with a strong emphasis on singing.

I think early on, we were all basically guitar players, some people were specifically singers. So there was not a drummer, there was not even a drum kit in the room. We didn’t have a bass player. Occasionally an electric guitar, pretty much it was all acoustic guitars. [...] But as things progressed, and we see it even with the current group, people start showing up with fancy guitars, electric guitars, people start bringing their amplifiers. One day you show up and we have a bass player suddenly. And then some guy brings in a drum kit. (Yanaga interview 2005)
At that time, Levitt was operating under pedagogically logical assumption that as more students signed up, the experienced students would sing the more demanding parts, but he apparently failed at first to see which parts would be more demanding.

Steve had told me once that his thought was that as new people came in, they would assume the background singing role, that kind of stuff, and then as they progressed, they’d move up to sing the lead portions. But in fact it works exactly the opposite. Because everyone knows the lead parts, and no one knows the background parts. So that’s kind of how it’s worked out. (Yanaga interview 2005)

This division of labor by skill level is consistent with participatory traditions around the world, as Turino has observed.

In participatory contexts, the full range of the learning curve is audibly and visually present and provides reachable goals for people at all skill levels. To keep everyone engaged, participatory musical and dance roles must have an ever expanding ceiling of challenges, or a range of activities that can provide continuing challenges, while, at the same time, there must be an easy place for young [i.e., less experienced] people to begin and for others who, for whatever reason, do not become dedicated to performing but still want to participate at some level. (Turino 2008, 31)

In the Beatles Ensemble, the less experienced players generally strum the chord progressions simply—a bare-bones rhythm guitar part—while only the most advanced and ambitious guitarists play the lead guitar solos. The lead vocal part, in contrast, turns out to be the easiest parts of all, despite its relative complexity, because it is the part newcomers have often been singing for years already; more experienced members tend to take the harmony parts. The core drum and bass parts are exclusively taken by reliable and knowledgeable members; should they crumble, so goes the whole performance. The self-assignment of musical roles was stratified not by difficulty or even by structural importance, but by familiarity and ease of recall. It also manifested in degree of finesse in following the Beatles’ model.

As time went on, of course, we got better, we all knew what parts fit us best, and it just happened to work out that it managed to cover all the parts. People weren’t
so concerned about singing the lead any more, at that time. It was more like, well let’s see if we can get it sounding like—[Beatles music] They were really a bold group. And when really you start—with all the Beatles albums—when you start studying it, there are a lot of nuances that you don’t really realize. Because everybody can sort of pick up the guitar and play something and make it sound ok, but when you get into it all these little things, well how’d they do that? (Yanaga interview 2005)

Given the mix of skills and experience in the ensemble, the pedagogical atmosphere was something like a one-room schoolhouse—but one in which everyone had to be literally on the same page at the same time. In one sense, it was like a faster-paced Second Half, favoring the more advanced students, with opportunities for those who want to try lead guitar solos as well as those who could barely keep with strumming the basic chord progressions, and everything in between. This could be disorienting for the less experienced players; after all, as well-known as the Beatles are, a large number of their songs are fairly obscure to the casual fan.

You come in expecting to play “I Want to Hold Your Hand” and “Help!” and “Hard Day’s Night” and you get “I Dig a Pony.” But nowadays, because two-thirds of the class or more is repeating, they kind of know this. So it’s, “Ok, let’s do the first song,” And you end up with: [demonstrates first couple bars of “Two of Us” on his guitar] and suddenly the whole song is there. And you’re trying to figure it out and people are jumping in singing harmony parts. (Yanaga interview 2005)

Within this context, and in pursuit of the goal of rehearsing the songs to a point of cohesion sufficient for public performance, Levitt managed to not only rehearse the specific material, but also to convey some broader, guitar-based musical principles. On the first day of each session, he provided song sheets for every song on the album in question. By the mid-2000s, home-burned CDs were also provided for everyone by one of the students, allowing everyone to listen to the music on their own time as deeply as desired. With the benefit of the printed material, backed by the aural and motor memories of a significant portion of the ensemble, recognizable music would burst forth from the first “reading” of any song. Levitt never needed to introduce the overall structure of a song (or, more colloquially, “how it goes”),
but was free to zero in immediately on potential problem spots. Typically, he would anticipate a
couple of these before starting a run-through of the song. One of the distinctive instrumental
texts, such as the bass line that introduces “Come Together,” would be broken down, for
example. Levitt might mention the tablature provided, but would focus attention on his own
demonstration, holding the neck of his guitar up high for visibility, and explaining the fingering
verbally. He might also touch on an unusual chord or chords and in the case of bar chords,
would invariably offer an alternate version (even if only a partial chord) for “those of you not
bar-chord certified.”

And then we would be off, playing straight through the song (though often at slower
tempos earlier in the session). It was rare that Levitt would need to stop the song in the middle.
Students who got lost simply fumbled along until they could catch up. At the conclusion of the
song (invariably punctuated by a word of praise from Steve), Levitt might bring up a problem or
two, or just take questions. There were always at least a couple of questions, often to do with the
fingering or interpretation of an unusual chord name. Occasionally there were questions about
the lyrics or meaning of a song, which Steve was generally able to field (for example, the
translation of “Jai Guru Deva,” the first line of the chorus of “Across the Universe,” or the
meaning of the word “pataphysical” in “Maxwell’s Silver Hammer,” for which he provided an
explanatory handout), often backed by comments from other knowledgeable members of the
Ensemble. In the course of these explanations, Levitt gradually imparted a theory of Beatles
guitar-based harmony, “linking the puddles” (see Chapter 7).

Unlike Mark Dvorak’s Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, where familiar songs were used as
convenient vehicles for learning principles and practices for musicking together, where the
objective was the experience, the Wednesday night Beatles Ensemble class was more focused on
the correct performance of specific songs. Some members might reasonably argue that the ultimate goal was still the experience, but on a practical, everyday level, energies were directed towards specific public performances in the near future; there was not a lot of time for undirected exploration.

The Saturday afternoon class, however, was a little different. A couple of years prior, a second section of the Beatles Ensemble had been set up to accommodate the registration overflow because the class size limit was habitually being exceeded and a significant percentage of students were being turned away at registration, but were showing up anyway. Janet Sayre’s understanding was that the new section was originally intended to be a dummy section to hold the overflow registration, while everyone continued to meet on Wednesdays. But people actually showed up on Saturdays, and so Levitt began teaching both (Sayre interview 2005). I switched to the Saturday class for my second session. The same material was covered, since members of either section needed to be prepared to play the same gigs, but it was much smaller—ten or twelve students, meeting in a more intimate space. The pace also felt much more relaxed. The simple fact that Steve did not have to project his voice—that no one did—encouraged students to ask more questions, and Steve to explore more tangents in discussion, like historical details surrounding the creation of a song (e.g., a conversation on whether or not Harrison was playing Eric Clapton’s guitar on “Here Comes the Sun”). Even more significant, the smaller number of musicians made it much easier to hear oneself, which of course enhanced the learning experience.

_A Beatles community._ “The important thing in a band, of course, is never the skills, and it’s never the actual playing abilities of any of the people in it, it’s the chemistry. You get a good chemistry among a group of people and they’re capable of great, great things” (Levitt interview
2005b). Despite the extraordinary size of the Beatles Ensemble, somehow they seemed to have
developed this chemistry. The Beatles Ensemble’s identity as a community—the shared
perception from inside and outside the group that it functioned as a social unit—was fundamental
to its very existence. The fact that the Beatles Ensemble fostered musical friendships was
obviously not unique, but the scale on which they succeeded in doing so certainly was. It was
essential to everyone’s first impression of the group: “It was overwhelming to witness the
connection between those people,” Judy Davis recalled, though as a naturally outgoing person,
she was not deterred from plunging into an outside gig her very first week (interview 2005). On
the other hand, Marla Cohen, who is much less extroverted than Davis, was initially intimidated.

Like the first day, they’re talking about who’s singing this and who’s doing that
and what album and I’m like, these guys are all crazy. These guys are really
fanatics, and I really didn’t know what I was getting into[...] I was pretty freaked
out. I could barely play the guitar first-off, and people were talking about
harmonies and this note and that note, and I’m like “what’s a G-chord?” It’s kinda
freaky. And how everyone knows everyone when you step in there. Kind of a
scary arena, people are all talking, it’s the first
day of class, and you’re like, “Am
I dreaming?” (Cohen interview 2005)

Despite very different personalities, both Cohen and Davis found a place in the Beatles
Ensemble, socially as well as musically, and have embraced it as a central part of their lives. But
not everyone takes to it.

One of my friends and I have it divided up: people tend to turn out to be either a
“class-taker” or a “cult member.” So [TL and JP laugh a little] if you’re a class-
taker, you come for one session and then you go, or you’re scared off by week
three, ‘cause we’re like, “Beatle camp!” You know? And they’re like, [in a tone
of great trepidation] “A-a-h.” [both laugh] But, you know, that’s our joke.
People who are there and really love it and get something out of it tend to keep
coming back. And other people, it’s not for them, so they go. (Peel interview
2005)

Those who entered into those connections often found lifetime friends, as did Michael Mann.

“Some of the folks in the Beatles Ensemble have become my real life friends. In the other
ensembles I’ve played in, they were school friends, you know what I mean?” (Mann interview 2005).

Certain specific habits facilitated the welcome new members received, such as a loose system of “Beatle buddies.” “It means that if there’s a new person, [Steve] will say, ‘If anybody needs a Beatle buddy, let me know.’ And then he’ll hook us up with somebody[….]. And it’s generally just to, if you needed somebody to make copies of music, because cause you’re brand new” (Davis interview 2005). Beatle buddies help new members with mundane tasks, like letting them know how gigs work or what the play list will be, or helping them find a ride. But these small gestures significantly reduce a newcomer’s sense of disorientation, while also reducing the need for class time to be spent reviewing old information.

It might seem inevitable that a completely open-door policy might occasionally result in unpleasant people joining the group and potentially disrupting the dynamic. But there is little evidence of that having happened.

You know, once in a while a person might join the group who might be a bit different or whatever, and you might think to yourself, ooh, that’s an odd one! But even if they stick, somehow it still ends up wonderful. I don’t even know how to describe that. It’s almost like the person who used to have a somewhat annoying demeanor is somehow transformed into a Beatle. And, once again, I think that’s because Steve is so good. Steve does not let somebody outrageous try to take over that class, or somebody who’s too obnoxiously self-centered take over that class or somebody who plays too loud take over that class. He’s got a fabulous way of keeping people in line in the most beautiful and um…subtle way. (Davis interview 2005)

I noticed certain individuals (not named here) who, in other contexts, might have come across as irritating or even creepy, yet somehow, by virtue of having been given an unconditional spot at the table, had integrated with the group and, though some of their social habits may have been a bit awkward, they were clearly committed to the same collective goodwill as everyone else.
The ideal of unconditional acceptance was modeled by Steve, in his consistent ability to find value in every viewpoint.

He doesn’t put people down. Like if somebody has what somebody else might think is a stupid question, instead of rolling his eyes and being like, “Well, you know, we don’t do it that way,” he’ll be like, “Well, no, let’s consider this.” He’ll put it out there. It’s just very…I really appreciate that ability in him[…]. Some of the teachers that I’ve had…I don’t know, I guess I’m kind of a know-it-all [laughs]. Or whatever, I come across as a know-it-all, and in my mind I’m just trying to be helpful. And so I’ve butted heads with other teachers in the past, because […] they try to beat me back down. Steve embraces my “know-it-all-ness” [laughs]. And makes it a positive thing! And looks upon it as—he does see it as me trying to help. So, just for me on a person level, I really, really appreciated that. [pause] And he can play anything. [both laugh] (Peel interview 2005)

In general, this attitude seemed to carry through the Ensemble in members’ interactions with each other. They are, in a word, nice.

My feeling was that the community itself should police itself and love itself. I just set up a few rules early on. Not really rules, but […] I remember saying something like, “I think the thing that we’re doing well is that we’re being a little nicer to each other than we have to be, just a little bit. We’re just being one step nicer to everybody than we would be otherwise. And that’s all it’s really taking to do this.” (Levitt interview 2005a)

As anyone who has played in an ensemble under pressure to perform knows, large group rehearsals can be stressful and test anyone’s patience. Again, Steve’s behavior leading rehearsal presented a model for nice criticism.

OK, let’s say I play acoustic guitar. Let’s say the electric guitars are getting louder and louder and louder and just getting more obnoxious and more obnoxious. Steve never says “Turn down! You people are bad!” Instead, he says, “Well, we certainly heard all the electrics, didn’t we, acoustics?” And all the acoustics are like, [groaning a little] “Yeah…” And then he’ll say, “Ok, excuse me electrics. We acoustics”—cause he’ll play an acoustic—“We acoustics are going to do this same song all by ourselves, because we would like to hear ourselves for one time, we really like to hear ourselves. So if you’re not one, please don’t play this next song.” It’s a very subtle, nice way of saying “turn down.” And there’s not a person in that room who doesn’t reach over their amp and turn down and sit through listening to us acoustics. (Davis interview 2005)
Michael Mann shared another example. “He’s a terrific teacher, and patient. I’ve seen him walk up to people and say, [quietly] ‘You know, your D-string isn’t in tune’[…] But when we’re done with this song we’ll tune it up” (Mann interview 2005).

Although Steve Levitt’s leadership is key to the Beatles Ensemble dynamic, he never thought it appropriate that he should “drive” it.

I was a central figure, and I did not want to be the central figure. I wanted to be a central figure. And I knew that part of this was the music, and the experiences we were having on stage. But I realized that we were having very powerful experiences that were not happening—that were happening because of that, but were not part of that. And that that was not really my area of things. That I was over here, and the ensemble was bigger than my class. It was way bigger than my class then, all of a sudden. And I thought, OK! That’s good. But I don’t have to be the central figure for all of that. I’m the central figure over here and that gives me all the…stuff that I need in order to help deal with all the other stuff. (Levitt interview 2005a)

Levitt of course serves as the teacher and overall music director (not that anyone used the latter term). Others take charge of various social, organizational and financial aspects. As Janet Sayre, a full-time administrative employee of the Old Town School as well as a Beatles Ensemble student, explained,

We don’t have officers, really, but we have an informal kind of governing board. Amy is kind of the secretary, and N---’s kind of the treasurer, and…there’s some sort of leaders, people emerge, and the people who get the gigs kind of become the producer of that particular show. So, I’m not one of those people, but I’m kind of like—I’m almost like a liaison to the administration (Sayre interview 2005)

These leadership roles were gendered, not necessarily by design, but this division of labor was explicitly observed by members I spoke with.

The political organization of the family, of the community, is organized around females. Like I’ve been taught in school happens. And that’s quite right. The sisters of the Beatles Ensemble know exactly how to do everything, about this stuff. They know how to set it up. Parties, what gets brought to the party. They organize the details I would have no clue about, but they know how to make a community, they know how to do that. So I’ve learned from them what needs to
be done. Just by watching them do it, and by, in a sense, allowing me to participate in their thing. They adopted, or organized around that principle [being nicer], but the community itself is…. And, they’re strong individual people. And they know how to put a group together. (Levitt interview 2005a)

We all adore Steve, but he’s not good at that stuff. And it’s a girl thing too, you know[….] The Beatle Babes, as we call each other, we’re much better at the organization part of the thing. There wouldn’t be a Beatle Camp if it wasn’t for K--, and there wouldn’t have been a trip to Colorado if it hadn’t been for H--- and myself trying to find that bus and the way out there. (Rasmussen interview 2005)

Amy Rasmussen describes herself as one of the “ringleaders”; Jenny Peel would probably also qualify, as would a couple of other women I met but did not have the opportunity to interview. Rasmussen was involved in early efforts to create a social life for the group outside of class.

N--- and I threw the first parties and had everybody over. It really started to get people to know each other. It wasn’t about performing, it was never about performing, it was always about ‘let’s make friends.’ I was single, I was living in the city – I had friends and family around, but I was always looking to meet more people. For me, it wasn’t necessarily about that, it was about getting to know people on a very musical level. (Rasmussen interview 2005)

It is interesting that in the above comments, Rasmussen seems to contradict herself, vis-à-vis the importance of musical performance to friendships. The parties were “never about performing,” but yet were about “getting to know people on a very musical level.” She very clearly values the specifically musical communication that develops from playing with the same people for a long time, and the friendships that can grow out of those connections; and not only values those friendships, but takes action to nurture and encourage them. It seems to me that “never about performing” refers only to the parties themselves, that those events were not intended to involve music, but were instead designed to give members the chance to get to know each other in another mode.
After playing together and having parties, the email list constituted a third mode, a simple means of communicating important logistical details to everyone at once. Rasmussen started the email list in 2000 to keep the members in communication outside of class and across sessions. “There was no group movement before the e-mail list” (Rasmussen interview 2005).

You existed in these eight-week pods. I had done a ton of other classes. You sort of meet people for eight weeks and then you don’t talk to them again. That’s really unfortunate, I think. As someone who plays music in an orchestra and chamber music groups, [I know] it takes years to get to know how to play with people. How to look at someone’s eye and know the cue and get what they’re saying. You can’t do that in eight weeks. (ibid.)

The list was not intended for discussion, but was merely a vehicle for posting announcements (which could be contributed by any member), mainly pertaining to Beatles events, but occasionally pertinent news articles or other items of general interest might be broadcast, and Rasmussen and the other moderators would make sure that everyone joined it.

Having a method for communication with a large group is really key to keeping us all together. Basically people have come up to me and said “I don’t have email” and I’m like “Get on board the train ... “ I know it’s mean, but that’s the way we’re going to communicate with each other in terms of “this is where you gotta be for this gig,” or “this is what’s going on,” that’s the way it’s being done. (ibid.)

These social developments emerged alongside a growing performing ambition among the Ensemble members.

There was 9/11 and the band coalesced and said, “Let’s go out and perform, and we’ll donate the money to some organization.” We looked around and one of us found a small school, literally in the shadow of the [World Trade Center], a little independent music school that had had all their instruments destroyed. And we sent them a check for $5,000, $6,000. I don’t remember how much we raised. It was a lot, though. We toured around. […] That was the first time we fundraised, was for that […] and then we moved it to other general things. Every year up until this year, we’ve picked a particular charity and donated the funds there. (Levitt interview 2005a)
This modest fundraising ambition gave the group an additional sense of purpose, motivation to seek out performing opportunities beyond the simple (but not insignificant) desire to be on stage. For several years, the Beatles Ensemble even became a “member” of the Old Town School—apparently the first (and perhaps only) class ever to make a collective donation to the School.

Hand in hand with the extension of the Beatles Ensembles’ musical and organizational concerns came an expanded commitment to each other, socially. One major development on this front was the invention around this time of “Beatles Camp”, a weekend retreat in Algonquin, Illinois.

Which was a tremendous risk, in a way. And that just absolutely just set everything in beautiful living color. It was so clear that it was so cool. And we all met out there, you know […]. And many of us had bonded in little ways, but in a sense, that brought us out of the school, and into just us, and we sat around at the campfire—things that are now complete traditions, but they all set up that first time. And everybody was great, and we just had a great time together.

TL: What was the risk there?

SL: Well! We had a wonderful thing going. And we were about to take it on the road. If we hadn’t been who we thought we were, if the weekend hadn’t turned out well, if there’d been bad feelings, or something like that. You know, it was still a young community. And I think it was risky for all of us just to traipse off together and hang out. Once we got there, it was clear that it was going to be just fine. (Levitt interview 2005a)

The idea for a Beatles retreat seems to have arisen organically in class.

I mean with the advent of the first time we went to Beatle Camp? That started out as a joke, ‘cause Steve would sit in class and say, “Wouldn’t it be great if we were like all outside together and went camping?” And we were all like, “Yeah, ha ha ha!” He would bring it up, and he was only half serious, and then somebody said, “Well, you know, I know of a place—“this woman K---. And so things started falling into place, and all of a sudden we’ve found ourselves getting ready to go to this camp and spend the night together! I mean, we knew each other well enough, but you know, to see each other in our pajamas? It was pretty weird! But we were all game to do it, to just kind of see how it worked out. And it ended up being great. It was such a good time. And that really helped bring more things together, more people closer together[…] I got to be better friends with them
from that camp weekend, because we had talks, you know, sitting by the river. (Peel interview 2005)

The participants have even escaped their “third place,” the Old Town School, peeling away one more familiar structure and a few more inhibitions. “Everyone’s extremely relaxed and we’re away from family pressures and work pressure, so everyone can kind of just let their hair down. And it’s inevitably a lot of fun!” (Yanaga interview 2005).

All of a sudden, everyone’s sitting around the campfire playing guitar or playing baseball. We did the silliest thing – a hot air balloon went by, really low, and for some reason we all laid down and said “Hi”—all of a sudden we’re running into the grass and spelling it out with our bodies. Silly things just happened [….] It’s adult camp—who goes to adult camp and does what you do when you’re a kid? It’s like living back childhood dreams or...goofing around. That’s kind of cool. (Cohen interview 2005)

Beatle Camp became an annual event in the fall, and then a semiannual one when a spring weekend was added. Jenny Peel estimated that twenty to thirty people were attending each time by 2005. “All the [musical] equipment is in one big barn-like room, and so people will wander in and out and there’s a PA set up, and everybody and anyone can just plug it in and start playing” (Peel interview 2005). In addition, Levitt would sometimes organize afternoon rehearsals, as the weekend provided an opportunity to get in extra preparation for upcoming performances. And of course, there was singing by the campfire in the evenings.

The confidence born of a couple of Beatle Camps encouraged the group to try more ambitious overnight trips. Beginning in 2002, the Beatles Ensemble began participating in a Memorial Day weekend Beatles festival called “Abbey Road on the River,” held in Cleveland, Ohio (until 2005, when it moved to Louisville, Kentucky). And in 2004, members of the group made a road trip to Colorado to perform in a festival in a member’s hometown, with the gear and some members of the Ensemble traveling by chartered bus, while other members flew in.
It was another one of those crazy ideas, you know, getting all the way to Crested Butte, Colorado, with our gear[...]. I think part of it was precipitated by our camp experience, of being outside, and nature and guitars seem to go really well together, and so the idea of being in the mountains and playing outdoors, it was very appealing[...]. It was crazy! But we had a good time! The town was crazy about us! (Peel interview 2005)

Janet cited the trip back as one of her least favorite Beatle memories, however.

I could’ve lived without the bus ride back from Colorado. [JS and TL laugh] That was a twenty-four-hour ride. And it’s kind of fun, and rock-starry on the way there, and then on the way back, you’re like [dropping voice] wow. This completely bites. Which I guess is also rock-starry, in the bad way. (Sayre interview 2005)

Just like any other outside engagement, these overnight trips and out-of-town gigs were completely optional and involved only some of the members. Although united by a teacher, common repertoire, and a commitment to being a little extra nice to one another, the Beatles Ensemble was not just one group of friends, but several. Levitt referred to them at one point as “territories,” and another time likened them to little families within the Beatles clan.

And they all have different trips. My job then—I thought, ok, I have a good job here—because I can negotiate between the families. My job is not with the individual members of the ensemble, who are in the community all their own, doing just fine. But when family problems arise, then I think it’s a good idea to have someone who has everybody’s interests at heart. (Levitt interview 2005a)

Amy Rasmussen tended to hang out with a tighter group of ten or fifteen close friends within the Ensemble. “In any group of adults, there’s sort of factions of people. I don’t wanna say that that’s bad, but there’s certainly, I know, people who are really close friends and hang out all the time” (Rasmussen interview 2005). One way these various “little families” took shape was in smaller ensembles. Bryan Yanaga and Jenny Peel, for example, formed a trio with a third Beatles Ensemble member, Tom Ryan, becoming the Acoustic Humans, rehearsing and playing out irregularly—at one high point, a performance of theirs was even broadcast on Terri Hemmert’s WXRT radio show (Yanaga interview 2005). “I mean we don’t play so much, it’s
kind of a loose thing, but we are an official group. So that’s working out really well in terms of performance. Because we each have a part, we’re each responsible for something” (Peel interview 2005).

In at least one instance, an actual family was created, when Amy Rasmussen married Fred, the drummer. The two met through the Beatles Ensemble, and Fred proposed to Amy on stage at a Beatles Ensemble performance at an OTSFM First Friday in 2001, planned in collusion with Steve and, by coincidence, captured by a television crew and subsequently broadcast on WTTW, Chicago’s public television station, as part of a locally produced program on the School.

AR: I think it sort of gets to the heart of what the school’s about, not that this is a sort of place to come meet your spouse sort of thing...

TL: Although many people do.

AR: A lot of people do...but I think just the warmness and the fact that you would do something like that on stage and feel comfortable doing it on stage in front of a really warm audience and people on stage that you really care about. (Rasmussen interview 2005)

Another “conservatory refugee,” Amy had started taking guitar classes at OTSFM in 1995 or 1996, a couple years after graduating from college, starting down this path as “a totally different experience for me,” and joining the Beatles Ensemble in the fall of 1998; Fred was recruited to fill in as a drummer two years later. After seven years in the Ensemble, Rasmussen had effectively “graduated” from the ensemble, in terms of her own musical education, but she remained a committed member.

I think that musically, for me personally, I’m not really growing anymore. Which is why I tend to go outside and do other ensemble classes and do other things. But that’s OK, it’s not why I’m here, really, anymore. That’s changed. I’m here because all my friends are here. That’s definitely changed since the beginning[....] I’m never going to quit. (Rasmussen interview 2005)
There were obvious differences in level and length of commitment to the Beatles Ensemble, but
not even all of the long-term members necessarily felt they had a core group of friends there.
Sayre, who had been playing with the group for three years, told me, “I haven’t really made any
friends that I do non-Beatles things with, in that group, I don’t think. I have ‘Beatle friends,’
kind of, but I don’t have, there isn’t anyone that I would, like, call, and ‘let’s go to the movies’”
(Sayre interview 2005); yet she felt a strong affective connection to the ensemble nonetheless.
And of course, not all romances in the group work out, which can cause, at minimum,
awkwardness. Janet Sayre found it uncomfortable when she broke up with someone after dating
for just a summer, though it blew over eventually. “Because if you start dating someone inside
that group, you do it in front of the whole community. Everyone knows. So then if you want to
separate [laughs], you also have to do that in front of the whole community! Yeah” (Sayre
interview 2005). Members did not always get along, of course, though during the four months I
played with the Ensemble, I did not observe any notable tensions.

Sometimes there’s clashes. Not hate clashes, not anger clashes. But sometimes
there are clashes. And sometimes territory clashes. And the success of ensemble
is that so far those have not ripped the ensemble apart into two and then four, as
so often happens with clans. You see it in nature all the time. A clan’ll break up
and become two clans, and there’ll be interplay between the clans, but you’ll have
two clans. Up until this point, for the last seven years, I have been successful in
keeping this as single clan, more or less. And it’s something that I’ve taken a fair
amount of pride in. (Levitt interview 2005a)

In fact, conflict and disruption is often the catalyst for people to join the Beatles
Ensemble in the first place—particularly those who go on to become long-term members. “It
seems like everybody who joins the ensemble and really sticks with it and comes to the
performances and we really get to know them—[…] you can tell they’re sort of—they need
something, they’re at a point of transition in their life. A lot of people are like that. And they find
a family in it” (Rasmussen interview 2005). Marla Cohen was one of these people; like several others, she found the Beatles Ensemble during a divorce.

I was interested in eighth grade, and I wanted to take guitar, and like I said, my parents were just like “Forget about it” and this and that. It was always there, it just didn’t surface until I was on my own and I’m like, “Yeah, I’m going through a divorce, I’m gonna try to play guitar.” (Cohen interview 2005)

Michael Mann also joined after a divorce, as well as an injury.

It’s cheaper than therapy. And it’s clearly therapy. It’s a wonderful and enjoyable experience with really good people. The people I’ve come in contact with […] for the large majority of it have been good, honest people who are making a difference. I think if you can get up on the stage and make someone happy for three or four minutes … [whistles] think about that. That’s pretty cool. [laughs] I think it’s about the music. (Mann interview 2005)

The group would rally around those dealing with death and life-threatening illness. Sayre’s story of recovery from the loss of her parents is particularly poignant (see Chapter 10).

When another member’s wife was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2005, “everyone came out of the woodwork to help him out” (Cohen interview 2005). During that summer, Mann’s father died, and members of the Beatles Ensemble attended the funeral and supported Michael; it seemed to me at the time that the energy at rehearsal even flagged a bit in reaction.

The degree to which the Beatles Ensemble members were involved in each other’s lives, and the tightness of their friendships, was not lost on outsiders to the Ensemble within the Old Town School, amongst whom the term “cult” was often tossed around, semi-facetiously, and with “varying degrees of venom,” as Levitt noted, from affectionately teasing remarks to bemused resentment (Levitt interview 2005b).

A big ensemble tends to scare off other people who might be interested in the ensemble, but it looks like too much. People want to come in, just want to play a few Beatles songs, they don’t want to join an ashram. Just want to play “Please Please Me,” you know, and it looks, it probably looks fairly huge… I have no idea what the Beatles Ensemble looks like from the outside, but I suspect it can be off-putting, to certain people[…] I just think it’s, we’ve got our head poked up
and when you poke your head up about things, you get all kinds of stuff flying at you, positive and negative. (*ibid.*)

Other clans at the Old Town School probably did experience a similar degree of social involvement with one another, but none were as visible or—literally—outgoing as the Beatles Ensemble, which performing not only outside of the School but outside of Illinois, and none sustained such involvement over such a long period of years. The sheer size of enrollment was a source of anxiety and resentment at times. Since official enrollment limits did not always correlate with how the Ensemble actually worked, some students turned away at registration were angered. Some in the administration would be frustrated by the tendency for students to show up without registering (or, therefore, paying tuition). There may well have been resentment over the Beatles Ensemble’s disproportionate demand on resources, as there was occasionally dissatisfaction within the Ensemble with perceived lack of institutional support (at the same time, the group also appreciated the School’s hands-off attitude sometimes).

Socially, the Beatles Ensemble simply appeared strange to a lot of people. And as happens with any group of close friends, they were sometimes perceived as a clique, and therefore exclusive. Cindy Rotondo, whom I knew as a Guitar 2 student, expressed reluctance when I asked her if she’d considered signing up for the Beatles Ensemble

CR: I have, but I don’t think I’m there yet—to where I would have the level of skill where I would be comfortable doing it.

TL: I’m in it this session, and—

CR: Are you having fun?

TL: Yeah, it’s really fun—slightly bizarre experience.

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4 While the Jug Band was beginning to develop a similar performing schedule, it was, first of all, much, much smaller, and secondly, had only been together for a few months at this time; it would be interesting to learn how the group was regarded within OTSFM after a few years.
CR: Well, I heard it’s a pretty cliquish group, because most of them have been doing this forever.

TL: Yes and no. Yes it is, but it’s also—I was very surprised at how welcoming everyone was—

CR: Wow!

TL: —when I showed up as a new face. And several people went out of their way to say “Oh! Are you new here?” So that was very nice. (Rotondo interview 2005)

Nothing about the Beatles reputation or appearance from the outside had predisposed Cindy to think of them as a friendly, open group. “I’m always surprised by that, you know, you think that people would be a little bit more above the insults. But yeah, I’ve heard that there are—people won’t join the Beatles Ensemble because it’s like a cult. Which is so ridiculous! It’s just a class!” (Rasmussen interview 2005). Of course, it’s not “just a class,” any more than the Beatles were “just a band.” “The biggest downside to the success of the ensemble has been the success of the ensemble,” Steve said—which seems a striking parallel to the Beatles themselves.

The music of the Beatles. At the root and the center of the Beatles Ensemble is the music: the recorded legacy of the Beatles, bound up with the histories of their creation and reception, and echoing in the personal memories of the Ensemble members. When I asked Steve Levitt just how he was managing keeping his clan together, he replied, “I don’t know! Not exactly sure how I’m doing it. It’s because I know everybody loves everybody else, I know I have the Beatles music to always fall back on” (Levitt interview 2005a). Certain characteristics of the Beatles repertoire make it ideal for building an Old Town School class around, such as the variety of ways the material structures itself (see above), and its quantity and quality. Convenience of pedagogical packaging aside, the Beatles’ place in the Old Town School, along with and leading the other rock ensembles in prominence, was not unquestioned; the Beatles Ensemble’s
“cultishness” was not the only issue of contention surrounding it, the music was, too. A number of people that I knew complained of or expressed skepticism over the celebration of pop and rock in a school of folk music. One individual on the staff suggested in casual conversation, off the record and only half-jokingly, that I could be a “mole” in the Beatles Ensemble. He did not seem to be joking about his disapproval, though, when he said that he thought it was counter to “what we do here,” and that we have to fight against the tendency to play from albums. Whether one’s definition of “folk music” rested more on the process by which the music is made, or on the origins of the music being made, performing rock music produced within living memory in complete faithfulness to an unchanging recording challenged both principles.

To what extent can the music of the Beatles be considered folk music? Certainly in their compositions and style, the Beatles drew on a wide field of mostly American and English vernacular musics, with deep roots in various oral traditions as well as written and recorded ones. Steve Levitt poetically likened it to a reverse prism—instead of refracting white light into a spectrum of color, they transformed a rainbow of influences into a brilliant synthesis—and more prosaically, to a shopping mall.

Because there’s blues and showtunes and country and pop and rhythm and blues and all those distinct forms before the Beatles out there—soul music, this music, that music, jazz, everything. And there’s the lens, and out here there’s the Beatles, doing “Till There Was You,” and “Twist and Shout” and “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” […] and “Michelle”—French-sounding things. And Russian-sounding things. It’s all in there and yet it’s all accessible as the Beatles music. So, where before you had to go to five different stores and there’s the super-mall.

TL: The Beatles as the super-store?

SL: In a way, for me, they focused all that stuff for me, so that by listening to the Beatles, in a way, I was getting a great education in all that other stuff. Now, some people don’t need to go back through the looking glass in order to look at the single colors, but I did. It took me a while, but I wanted to go back and see, ok, what was this? So I go back, and I found Chuck Berry and […] that strange,
rough world of the rhythm and blues in the forties, where that proto stuff comes from. (Levitt interview 2005a)

For Steve, a child of the 1960s, the Beatles were an entry point in his music education, his ticket to digging for his musical roots, one of my four components of the Old Town School ethos. Michael Mann, about the same age, felt similarly: “The Beatles were my folk music when I was growing up, the Beatles were a great conduit to what was happening in the rest of the world” (Mann interview 2005). John Lennon and Paul McCartney’s own musical educations were not so different from Levitt’s, Dvorak’s, Tomasello’s, or those of many other OTSFM teachers, except that they did not enjoy the resource of an Old Town School.

The two boys’ actual experience of music-making had consisted mainly of the singing they did as children at church and at school. Paul had toyed with the trumpet and taken a few piano lessons; John had enjoyed a brief infatuation with a harmonica[.....] neither of them sought out formal instruction on the guitar, nor would they ever learn to read or write conventional musical notation. Had they wanted to take lessons, it wasn’t as if there was anyone in Liverpool who could have taught them much about the sort of rock-‘n’-roll guitar playing they wanted to learn[.....] Their real teachers were thus the records themselves. (Gould 2007, 58-59)

Lennon and McCartney’s first band was a skiffle band, tenuously linking the roots of the Beatles clan to those of the Jug Band Ensemble. A craze among 1950s British teenagers, skiffle music was roughly the same as jug band music, in its origins among the black street musicians of America’s river towns, popularized in Britain by traditionalist Dixieland jazz bands as a supposed precursor to jazz. A passing fad in the U.S. in the mid-1950s, skiffle had more impact in Britain. “The sole redeeming feature of skiffle was that it was a form of music so artless that it planted the thought ‘I could do that’ in the minds of adolescents throughout the British Isles” (Gould 2007, 31). This inspiration took hold in the minds of a significant number of future rock stars, including Van Morrison, Mick Jagger, and, of course, Lennon and McCartney. While the U.S. jug band revival of the 1960s Folk Boom prioritized a sense of old-fashioned, folky
authenticity, the earlier British skiffle bands were much more likely to indiscriminately blend in jazz and rock-’n’-roll elements like drum sets, wind instruments and guitars (Cohen 2002, 100).

Now, for me, on one side were the Beatles coming in from rock-electric but yet skiffle and jug band thing, and on the other side was the American folk music stuff, and that’s all meeting here at the Old Town School for me at the age of thirteen, fourteen. For me, the coming of the Beatles and the coming of the Old Town School in a sense were united right then, they were united in me. Now, nobody in the sixties or even in the mid-seventies when I was here with Ravenswood would ever have thought of a Beatles class here at the Old Town School—it was not considered folk music. (Levitt interview 2005a)

“The folk is becoming Beatles and then Beatles become folk,” Levitt said of the year he first took guitar classes at the Old Town School, a nonsensical statement to those committed an anti-commercialist definition of folk music, to those who believed that the Old Town School and organizations like it should be dedicated to preserving and promoting those musics not represented in the mass market.

In 1965, it was not only in Steve’s mind that the folk and rock-’n’-roll worlds were meeting, however. After the Beatles’ first U.S. tour in early 1964 ignited Beatlemania, Stateside, and Bob Dylan toured Britain in May 1964 to great acclaim, the star acts of the two worlds finally met in August of that year. In marketing terms, the worlds were considered completely separate.

[T]heir respective musical constituencies were […] perceived as inhabiting two separate subcultural worlds. Dylan’s core audience was comprised of young people emerging from adolescence—college kids with artistic or intellectual leanings, a dawning political and social idealism, and a mildly bohemian style. His music appealed to their maturity, their sensitivity, their morality, and their verbal sophistication. The Beatles’ core audience, by contrast, was comprised of veritable “teenyboppers”—kids in high school or grade school whose lives were totally wrapped up in the commercialized popular culture of television, radio, pop records, fan magazines and teen fashion. They were seen as idolaters, not idealists. (Gould 2007, 252-253)
The reality was, as always, more nuanced. With skiffle, the Beatles had had a glancing acquaintance with folk revivalist material, circa 1957, though they certainly did not share the concerns and interests of the traditionalists; and Dylan had launched his musical ambitions in high school with a rock-‘n’-roll band in 1958 (Hajdu 2001, 68). The founder of the Byrds, often taken as the exemplar of the “folk-rock” style, Jim (later Roger) McGuinn had begun guitar and later banjo classes at the Old Town School of Folk Music in 1957 or 1958, also as a high school student, after being inspired by Elvis Presley’s music to take up the guitar; Chicago folksinger Bob Gibson became his idol once he became active in the folk scene. After graduating, he immediately found work backing popular folk acts like the Limeliters and the Chad Mitchell Trio, as well as pop singer Bobby Darin. But it was the Beatles that brought McGuinn back to rock-‘n’-roll; he began playing songs of theirs in Greenwich Village clubs in 1963, joined the Byrds in Los Angeles the next year, and released a cover of Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man,” with Beatle-esque beat, guitar timbre, and vocal harmonies, in 1965. This became the first of Dylan’s songs to reach number one on the pop charts (Gibson and Bender 1999, 95; McGuinn n.d.; Stambler and Stambler 2001, 404).

Meanwhile, in the wake of their 1964 meeting, John Lennon was “by all accounts obsessed with [Dylan’s 1965] Bringing It All Back Home,” and was “making records on which he openly imitated Dylan’s nasal drone, brittle strum, and introspective vocal persona” (Gould 2007, 253, 287). Dylan, who had been captivated by the Beatles sound since “I Want to Hold Your Hand” (Filene 2000, 211), had meanwhile “gone electric” and adopted more of a rock/pop persona and style, angering the old folk guard, as dramatized in the folk revival legend of Dylan’s electric performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. The young people who were in the audience and buying his records, however, were neither surprised nor scandalized. To them,
the pieces fit, on the levels of both aesthetic pleasure and the political ideologies of rebellion (ibid., 184). Dylan from that point on adopted a rock star persona, but never stopped drawing deeply from the roots of American music and, together with the Beatles and other contemporaries, carved a new path for the “serious” artist in popular music.

The understanding of folk music as primarily a participatory mode of music making (i.e., “music folks make”) also has some traction with the Beatles story. Much has been made of the participatory appeal of Beatlemania, in particular for girls; from the beginning there was a sense among fans of belonging to something larger in loving the Beatles, of a shared experience. The discovery of screaming at Beatles concerts as an expression of a new sort of female identity, Jonathan Gould writes, turned girls into “active participants in the phenomenon of Beatlemania. Screaming set a lofty standard of participation. It was emphatic. It was physically and emotionally cathartic. And it soon dawned on these girls that there was no effective way for anyone to stop it” (Gould 2007, 185). Though often depicted in the press as a form of involuntary, sexualized, mass hysteria, Gould argues that, though it was certainly uninhibited, its power for girls was not sexual; “the real secret was that they could turn it on and off at will. They were free to lose themselves, regain themselves, and lose themselves again” (ibid., 186). Though this was not musical participation in the usual sense, it was certainly an active contribution to the soundscape of the Beatles experience, and could be considered “musicking,” as Christopher Small would define it.

Beatles songs soon became songs everybody knew, and in that sense began to enter a quasi-“folk” realm, alongside other contemporary songs like Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” or Phil Ochs’ “I Ain’t Marchin’ Any More” as tools for political solidarity. Unlike those examples, the Beatles lyrics generally did not have overt political messages, nor were the Beatles
themselves involved in student protests, but they often expressed a communal idealism and
represented “the cultural power of youth” (Gould 2007, 345). Gould cites an incident during a
student demonstration at University of California, Berkeley, in 1966 when, after a limp attempt
at singing the “Internationale,” a song that referenced another generation’s crusade, the crowd
enthusiastically burst into a sing-along of the Beatles’ “Yellow Submarine.” A flyer the next day
explained of the song, “we adopt for today this unexpected symbol of our trust in the future, and
of our longing for a place fit for all of us to live in[....] We love you” (ibid., 346).

This very popularity drove the Beatles away from public performance completely by
1966, when the audience became, instead of a partner in the performing experience, an
interference in their artistic goals (Kimsey 126). The opportunity to explore new possibilities in
studio audio art yielded *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*; the album stood in for their
“live” presence to reach the fans, and did the touring for them (to paraphrase George Martin
[Beatles 2000, 241]). Indeed for all the participatory enthusiasm of the moment, the Beatles
legacy, ultimately and unquestionably, is in their records. Even when they were still together as
a band, the vast majority of their audience never saw them live, and in the forty years since their
break-up, new generations of fans have continued to buy their recordings. But contained within
each listening experience, for fans from the Beatles generation and for those younger fans who
have done their research, are the echoes of the social history surrounding the Beatles, layered
over with the fans’ own associations from personal listening experiences over the years—what
Turino calls “semantic snowballing”—deepening their emotional significance (Turino 2008, 9).

Returning to the Old Town School, the Beatles Ensemble therefore draws on the Beatles’
recorded oeuvre as their primary text. The Ensemble’s adherence to the recording-as-text is close
enough that it’s meaningful to them to treat the American and British releases as distinct series of
albums, or to rehearse the album *Let It Be* and McCartney’s 2003 remixed *Let It Be Naked* in separate sessions. Steve Levitt teaches the class from the recordings, providing students with song sheets, chord charts and occasional transcriptions in tablature for reference; the complete “transcription” actually resided in Levitt’s head—what he called a “mental template”—and he transmitted it orally and by visual demonstration, encouraging students to also rely on their own “inner Beatles” and to correct his when it went astray.

In the Old Town School debate on the use of notation in class, the Beatles Ensemble falls firmly on both sides. On the one hand, it is clearly a reading ensemble. Partly due to the logistical challenge of pulling so many people together onto—literally—the same page, a typical rehearsal or performance features a small forest of music stands and fluttering song sheets. The precision with which they desire to adhere to the original recordings requires complete agreement on lyrics, chord changes, and certain melodic lines that therefore must be explicitly written down for everyone. Levitt’s Beatles song sheets were similar to those used for other guitar classes at the school, noting the chords by letter name beneath each line of text, aligned with the word on which they change (more or less). In addition, however, especially tricky chords would be spelled out in tablature in the margins or on page two, and in the case of bar chords, a bar-free simplified fingering would often be provided. A recurring melodic fragment, such as that which opens “Here Comes the Sun” would be notated in guitar tablature at the top of the sheet and then called upon later as needed by a designation like “Lick #1.” An extended solo might be written out (again, in tablature) on the back of the sheet or at the end of the song; the majority of players would presumably not be attempting it in performance, and so sometimes Levitt would merely write these on the board during class to be copied down by those interested. Standard staff notation was not provided on these handouts.
There was also much mention and occasional use of “the Bible,” referring to the 1136-page *The Beatles Complete Scores* published by Hal Leonard (1993). The ultimate Beatles reference source, “the Bible” consists of exhaustively detailed transcriptions in both tablature and standard score of all 210 Beatles songs as recorded. I observed a pianist read from this on occasion, but not only was it too unwieldy to be practical for anyone else, it did simply did not facilitate the way most Old Town School students learned. It was, however, often referenced by students in discussion as an ultimate authority, by Levitt much less. As he pointed out,

A lot of this music was made this way [i.e., without formal notation], it’s not transmitted from a printed page. At least, they didn’t, of course, do it that way, and it’s always bit of a shock to people trained that way [from notation] when they see Beatle Bible, to realize that the Beatles themselves never wrote any of their stuff down. Like, that would not have been their style at all, they had their own elaborate models inside and outside that they were using, traditional models. (Levitt interview 2005)

It is, in fact, usually much easier to learn Beatles melodies and harmonies from a guitar fingerboard perspective, and their rhythms from a strumming pattern perspective, without reference to a piano-centric notational system, something that I, trained as a classical pianist, received as a minor revelation while learning with the Beatles Ensemble. Levitt likened it to translating the music into a foreign language and preferred to stay within the native tongue.

This sometimes resulted in some notational idiosyncrasies. For example, for the *Abbey Road* session, his sheet for “Here Comes the Sun” outlined a guitar lick in the middle of the song that accompanies the words “sun, sun, sun, here it comes” into eighth-note counts (see Example 9.1). Some of us needed this explained; it was intended to indicate the number of eighth notes each chord was broken into in arpeggiation, though he also pointed out that one could strum on the eighth-note counts instead of picking arpeggios to make it easier to play (see Example 9.2 for alternate visualization). He also provided the passage in guitar tablature (see Example 9.3). For
Example 9.1: Excerpt from “Here Comes the Sun” songsheet, “Lick #2” (from 1:29 to 2:11 on the original Beatles recording)

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
A(7) & F(3) & C(3) & G(5) & D(8) & \text{inst 2x then} \\
\text{sun} & \text{sun} & \text{sun here it} & \text{comes} & \text{4x} & \\
\text{then} & A7 & 4x \\
\end{array}
\]

Transcription by Steve Levitt, 2005 or earlier

Example 9.2: The author’s re-visualization of Levitt’s “Here Comes the Sun” songsheet, Lick #2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chord:</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of 8th notes in arpeggio:</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 repetitions, instruments only, followed by 4 repetitions with vocals. Then, four bars (16 eighth notes) of A7 before returning to verse.

Example 9.3: Excerpt from “Here Comes the Sun” songsheet, “Lick #2” guitar tablature. Each line represents one string of guitar; top line is high E. Numbers indicate frets.

```
---------------------------------------------------------------2-----
---1-----------------------------------------------------------3--2--
---2----------------------------------------------------------0-----2--0--
---2----------------------------------------------------------0-----2--0--
---0---------3---------------------------------------------2---------2--0--
---------------------------------------------------------------3-------
```

Transcription by Steve Levitt, 2005 or earlier

Example 9.4: Transcription of “Lick #2” from “Here Comes the Sun” in staff notation

\[\text{\includegraphics{staff_notation.png}}\]

5 On many of Levitt’s song sheets he included the disclaimer: “This file is the author’s own work and represents their interpretation of the song. You may only use this file for private study, scholarship, or research.” This disclaimer should be understood to apply here.

6 This appears to be an error; on the recording, there is only one repetition without vocals and one with vocals.
comparison, I provide a transcription in staff notation as well (see Example 9.4).

But, as he stressed in one class I attended, this analytical breakdown was only as good as it was helpful, as long as it did not compete with or confuse the “Here Comes the Sun” template that he assured us we all had in our minds.

If you have a template, a really good template for “sun, sun, sun,” and yet you can’t count it out in the three, five, eighth note thing, does that mean that you can’t count it or that you don’t have it? I say no! If you have a precise length of “sun, sun, sun” inside, you don’t need to count! It’s more like Grandma’s recipes. Pinch of this, throw in a cup of that[…..] One’s inner Beatle is very precise. Beatle humans are very precise about their Beatle songs. If you abandon it now, it gets even harder[…..] I’m depending on all the work you’ve done up until this moment! (Levitt, Beatles Ensemble class, Saturday, July 30, 2005)

Thus, the ear trumps the eye, even if what is being “heard” is only the memory of the song. But the memory is only as good as its source; listening to the recordings in the here-and-now and practicing with them was essential. “How many times do you have to play it? Tons! Tons! Do you have to play along with George and them? Yes! You must play with them! That’s your template” (ibid.).

The sympathetic resonance between that remembered template and one’s own precision in playing should be a source of pleasure, he further explained.

In fact, this:
[plays A major chord, fingered like D major with capo at 7th fret] should send a thrill through your brain that this:
[plays opening bars of “Here Comes the Sun” in key of E major, fingered as D major, with capo at 2nd fret] —some part of your brain should be cold and unresponsive. [students laugh]
Until I go here!
[plays same fragment in key of A major with capo at 7th fret, as on recording] And then it should just melt wide open! That’s what happens with my brain. And it’s because we love not just the shape, but the precise location. That’s precision! That’s how I know how precise you are. Because:
[capoed A major chord] —that is thrilling! And this:
[capoed E major chord]—is a D shape somewhere. That’s the difference. I don’t know how to explain that, particularly, but we trust it every day. (ibid.)
While the Beatles Ensemble did use notational aides of various kinds quite heavily, they were intended only as a crutch; learning by ear and playing by memory were strongly encouraged as the end goal. When I first joined, I considered playing piano instead of guitar with the group, but Levitt urged me to do it only if I could play by ear, or at least from the song sheets like everyone else (I couldn’t, and felt I had more to learn on guitar anyway). He was constantly reminding students in class to try to memorize the songs and look up at each other. But, in line with the inclusivity principle, no one was ever required to do so. After ten years in the Ensemble, Bryan Yanaga had some clear views on the topic.

It’s a continuing issue. Well, it’s only—it’s not an issue in that there is no pressure from anyone to have to abandon your music stand. People who do, do so on their own initiative […] I’m always telling people, you don’t know what you don’t know unless you put down the music and play a song, and where you get stuck you realize you don’t know it. And the ensemble is the most nurturing, safe place you could possibly ask for to do that. Right? So why not take the opportunity? But no one does. So. But the people who have started to learn the music, are coming to me, “Yeah, you’re right, this is great!”

‘Cause it’s like, when you’re a kid, my instrument was air guitar. Everyone plays air guitar. And you’re jumping around. And when you don’t have your music, you can do that with a real guitar! [TL laughs] […] Now, should there be a push for people to learn the music? I don’t think so. Because, again, people are there for their reason. Some people are there for a session or two just to try it out—they love the Beatles and they want to see what that’s like. And I’m sure most people aren’t coming there with intent, they want to be part of a performing entity. So you really can’t force that issue. So it is what it is. (Yanaga interview 2005)

One thing Levitt’s song sheets do not show are the arrangements, instrumental or vocal. And yet, the Ensemble tried to be as faithful as possible to the arrangements on the recordings. Given the alleged unperformability of the Beatles’s studio productions, this allegiance is particularly notable. Getting “the notes” of each little guitar riff was not enough; it had to be played on the same strings at the same frets in the same tuning as the original to sound right. The tempos had to be as close as possible. If “Helter Skelter” fades out after 3:40, then gradually
fades back in, so must the performance— and someone must of course yell “I got blisters on my fingers” at the end, like Ringo.

Though rooted in guitar traditions, the Beatles recordings employ increasingly diverse instrumentation as the albums progress, and Amy Rasmussen, with her classical flute and oboe background, began to recruit and arrange the wind parts.

I’m not a blow my own horn kind of person, but I’m kind of one of the more technically savvy, and in terms of musical knowledge, can arrange parts. So I take the other people and we sort of get together and say “you should play this here and this here” and sort of do some arranging with that. And it’s really casual, but I’m probably sort of a leader in that if there had to be one, in pulling that kind of stuff together. (Rasmussen interview 2005)

In fact, she may have been partly responsible for the BE’s progression towards becoming entertaining on stage, with a more faithful evocation of the original recordings. “I know Steve wants to keep it—he teaches the Beatles class so you could play in your living room for your friends. That’s his philosophy, and I agree with that. But there’s sometimes when we need to get to that next level and make a little spectacle of it” (ibid.) Flutes, trumpets, cellos, harps, and, when all else fails, kazoos have all joined the Beatles Ensemble on stage at one point or another to fill in various instrumental timbres featured on the recorded arrangements. Vocal arrangements—melodies and harmonies—were taught entirely orally (or learned aurally from those mental templates), never notated at all. But impersonation of the vocal timbre of the Beatles did not seem to be a goal, and would not be feasible in what was essentially a choral enterprise. I rarely heard anyone overtly imitate the vocal timbre of one of the Beatles, though they might end up reproducing their inflections and pronunciations at times.

“People who are Beatle fans, they’ve been around for forty years, so they know what the different things are, they know they’re expecting a certain thing at a certain time. And when you provide that, that I think enhances their enjoyment, it makes it a little more special” (Yanaga
interview 2005). The close kinship the Beatles Ensemble built between beloved recording and a faithful yet personally meaningful performance of it strongly resembles the experience of karaoke, a perhaps more common context where one performs one’s personal relationship with popular music publically. As Rob Drew writes in his ethnographic account of karaoke bars in the 1990s, “What all crowd favorites have in common is that they seem to crystallize the experience of the people who celebrate them and, as a result, to constitute these people as members of a common culture” (Drew 2000, 56). So important is the memory of the sound of the original recording, Drew notes, that it is the performances that diverge the least from the original that bring karaoke performers and audiences alike the most pleasure; the timbres and nuances of the star’s recording are imbued with as much meaning and value as the more easily abstracted tune and lyrics.

What was the depth of meaning that the Beatles’ music had for Ensemble members? I was surprised to discover the degree of and individual’s involvement in the Ensemble did not necessarily correlate with his or her level of familiarity and attachment to the Beatles. Despite his appreciation of and long familiarity with the Beatles, Steve Levitt was never an obsessive fan. “I had had some experience with the music. I certainly was no expert on Beatles music when I started to teach the class. I just knew a few tunes. I have a quirky memory, as you know, and I just remember most of the stuff I’ve ever played” (Levitt interview 2005a). Michael Mann, approximately the same age as Levitt, felt similarly.

MM: The music was beautiful, the lyrics, the lyrics were smart. They never talked down, always talked at. The music was good.

TL: So you were a fan of the Beatles back then, when they were current.

MM: Yeah, I was, up to a point. For me, music is the deal. With the exception very few things I listen to a lot of different kinds of music. The Beatles were the thread that went through the whole deal. I never got far away, I always looked
forward to the next Beatles album[. . .] You gotta understand, before the days of
the multi-disc CD player, we used to stack three or five albums on at the same
time. It wouldn’t be uncommon for me to have a blues album, jazz album, two
Beatles, an Airplane, whoever. (Mann interview 2005)

Bryan Yanaga and Jenny Peel, a few years younger, were children then and experienced the
Beatles as an important component of their formative musical experience. *Yellow Submarine*
was the first album Yanaga purchased—though, again, it does not seem that he was ever an
obsessive fan. For Peel, the sound of the Beatles is wrapped up in her family life.

Well, I basically grew up in a Beatles household. I’m the youngest of five and my
siblings were much older, so they were all into Beatlemania. When I popped out
it was 1966—the year *Revolver* was released, so was I! *[laughs]* So I came out
into a Beatles household. So the music was very important for me growing up,
and I’ve always listened to it over the years, sometimes more often than not.
(Peel interview 2005)

Younger still, Amy Rasmussen had far fewer associations with the Beatles; as a child of the
1980s, her pop soundscape was populated by U2, REM, Depeche Mode and the Cure—“I had no
knowledge of the Beatles. Well, almost none” (Rasmussen interview 2005). Generation was not
the only factor, however; Judy Davis, between Mann and Yanaga in age, confessed to me she
simply didn’t know the Beatles music much at all.

TL: So have you ever been—has there ever been a period where you were a big
Beatles listener?

JD: *[sheepishly]* No! *[both laugh]* And if you write that somewhere they’re gonna
come and kill me! *[jokingly]* I have a confession. I bet I only knew about 50% of
the Beatles stuff when I joined. And I would sit next to my one friend that isn’t in
the group any more, George, and I would say, “George, I don’t know this song.”
He’d say, “Oh, my gosh, don’t admit that to anyone else! And go buy the CD for
yourself.” (Davis interview 2005)

Indeed, although Beatles Ensemble members could be obsessive about their knowledge
of the Beatles, for some, this passion seems to have taken hold only as part of the love for
playing and being with this particular group of people. But the songs are still at the center of everything.

Those are the things that bind us together. And not just the fact that we share them from here and there, that we love the tunes and love the Beatles. ‘Cause for many in that community now, when we do “Please Please Me,” we remember every “Please Please Me” we played. “Remember when we did this?” You know? And it’s difficult to play a song where there isn’t a little thrill to me where I don’t remember something about our experience together with that song. People will remember, for example [...] the trouble we had with this song, or how we couldn’t get this one to go, and you know, we’d kick it, and we’d feed it, and we’d do everything we could to it and it just wouldn’t get up. And then play it for six months and then you play it and the thing just scampers out, it’s like awesome. It’s those kind of weird experiences. So the songs themselves. (Levitt interview 2005b)

*The Beatles as entertainment.* If the Beatles Ensemble prioritized participatory music-making in its social organization and valued recorded music as the source of its material and the repository for its collective memory, in its goals—at least, the practical, day-to-day ones—presentational performance was the primary concern. “Well, I think that’s ultimately what you want to do if you’re playing. You want to get up in front of an audience and play. It’s like playing in your bedroom—ultimately you want to do something. So that’s kind of the motivation” (Yanaga interview 2005). To Yanaga and the other Beatles clan members I spoke with, yet in contrast with those of the Spontaneous Folk Clan, the desire to perform publicly seemed like a natural consequence of learning to play; after all, that’s what the Beatles themselves did.

The Beatles Ensemble had been performing at Old Town School events from early on—end-of-session graduations, First Fridays, fundraisers like the one described at the beginning of this section, and the occasional tribute concert if appropriate (given that they never performed any non-Beatles song). Around the turn of the millennium, as noted above, the Beatles Ensemble began pursuing gigs outside of the School in earnest. Typically, performing
opportunities came from individual members: “usually it happens that someone knows someone who says, ‘Hey, you know, we can play at this place’” (Yanaga interview 2005). The Ensemble performed at block parties, street festivals, private parties, various fundraisers, bars, and other events with a modest profile, yet enough space to accommodate such a large group. Soon after I joined the group, Judy Davis brought a gig to the group for the first time, a fundraiser for Quigley Preparatory Seminary, a private high school in Chicago.

So the Quigley’s gig is really a very nice thing because that’s where my son goes to school, and we want to raise funds, so we’re trying to provide entertainment, and it’s fun to have a gig. The first year or two years, three years maybe, I was in the group, I never asked them to perform at anything for my interests. And it’s fun to do that. Because then your buddies will make sure to show up—they’ll say, “Judy, I’ll be there for your son’s school!” And there’s just this sense of you brought something to the table to perform at. I mean, yes, they’re helping us to raise funds, but [it’s] also an opportunity to perform—that’s what turns that group on. We are a performing group. So everybody’s happy. Both sides are happy. (Davis interview 2005)

Whatever the educational content of Beatles Ensemble classes, they were also always rehearsals, explicitly directed toward the goal of performing publicly. And yet, paradoxically, the emphasis on inclusivity was never lost—not only in the classroom, but on stage as well. Nearly all of the Beatles Ensemble members I interviewed recalled their surprise when they first joined at both the encouragement they received from other members to start playing gigs immediately, and their own enthusiasm for jumping right in (admittedly, my sample was biased towards the especially committed). Judy Davis, again:

JD: It was also frightening because I started in June or July and they were on their summer schedule. And summer schedule means a gig every week—

TL: I’ve noticed!

JD: —or maybe sometimes two in a weekend […] and I thought, “I just finished Guitar Rep 2, how can I possibly do this?” But I did.

TL: So you were gigging that first summer?
JD: The first week! [both laugh] The end of the week there was a gig—I went out and I did it! And somebody said to me, “You’re the only person I’ve seen with enough guts to show up the first week.” I said, “Well, I can sing! So… And play guitar a little bit. So, why not show up?”

Though shyer, Marla Cohen showed up for a performance even sooner than Davis.

TL: So you did perform then, right in that first session?

MC: Not only the first session, I [had] only had that one class. First Friday was the next day. I went home, and I’m crazy, so it was like seven, eight, nine hours of practicing before we got up there. Just got up there and did it and thought it was the coolest thing[….] I can’t believe how much I love to perform. It’s a core of friends that I all of a sudden have, they’re really cool people. I never knew that playing guitar was so fun. (Cohen interview 2005)

I was not quite as quick to join the fray, despite a considerably stronger performing background and unambiguous encouragement; one of my earlier performances with the group was the graduation night at the end of my first session, a Saturday evening event held at 909 Armitage especially for all the rock ensembles.

On my way out, I exchanged a few words with Jenny and Tom. “Well, did you have fun?” was their first question. “That’s the only thing that matters,” they said. “That’s the point of being in a twenty-person band,” Tom said, “Just play the parts you know and don’t play the parts you don’t know.” (Problem is, I said, when you play the parts you don’t know). It’s very hard for me to adopt that attitude about playing. But it is truly believed by the Beatles Ensemble. I keep waiting for a crack in it to show—where people will show a more negative side. I do see critical faculties showing up periodically, from more than just Steve, I mean, but so far, the priority placed on fun has been rock-steady. (Fieldnotes for June 18, 2005)

The inclusivity principle always trumped any concern for a polished presentation, since fun was the paramount goal.

Which is why you can sign up for the ensemble and be in your first class and in your first couple weeks and suddenly you’re on center stage with a microphone in front of you. You’re not relegated to the back corner until you develop seniority. Which, some people I think initially, and admittedly I might be one of those as well, think, well that’s not really fair. Right? But in the end, I think it actually is working exactly as it should. Because that’s really what we’re about. And the
spectacle end is just, when people come see us, is “oh yeah, I could do that. Look at that schmo there. I probably [could do that] if not better.” So that’s part of our attraction. And I think it works. […] I think it works. There’s nothing that says it should work, but it does. (Yanaga interview 2005)

At a typical performance, the Beatles Ensemble presented a chaotic picture at first. They would show up to performances in the most casual everyday clothes—t-shirts and shorts, jeans, no more make-up than usual, if any—and take twenty minutes to squeeze themselves and all their gear on stage, in a haphazard arrangement with no thought to visual appeal. They looked like a bunch of very ordinary people. “What always seems to amaze me, and I’m sure it amazes the audience as well, is that you think, ‘How could any comprehensible music come out of this, this throng?’ But it always does. And it’s always entertaining. It’s a good sound. Again, it’s not the record, it has our own stamp on the sound. But ninety-nine times out of a hundred it seems to work” (Yanaga interview 2005). From the perspective of being on stage, it also felt a bit like a throng. I felt rather disoriented and awkward at my first Beatles performance.

It was hard to find a spot on stage. Where do you stand so you’re not too front-and-center, not completely obscured? Do you get a mic or don’t you? I ended up clustered with Judy and one woman who only sings (she got the mic of course), right in front of B---, so I felt a little awkward at that, since he takes most of the guitar solos. We had no piano player tonight, so Steve winged it on the piano for “Don’t Let Me Down” and “Let It Be” and played the piano solo for “Get Back” on the guitar. When we got to “For You Blue,” I realized I’d left my capo in my case, so I left the stage to go get it, intending to sit the song out. Steve called me out by name, “what’s going on?” He had an extra capo in his pocket, of course. I was embarrassed, but everyone acted like it was perfectly normal and just one of those funny Beatle things. (Fieldnotes for June 18, 2005)

For all the preparation that went into learning the songs, very little went into specific preparations for a specific show; I’m not sure whether or not Levitt knew in advance that the piano player would not be there.

On “For You Blue,” T--- took the slide guitar solo, though B--- had been doing it all session on Wednesday nights. I heard them negotiating that quickly beforehand, but hadn’t understood what it was. Both were very good-natured
about it (and other members of the group contributed as well)—no sense of egos. Another time when B--- took a solo—might have been “Let It Be”—T--- leaned over and complimented him afterwards. At the very end, both were recognized by name to cheers and applause. (ibid.)

Not only was the presentational style haphazard, the musicianship and skill levels of the Ensemble members were diverse, to say the least.

When you look at the ensemble, if you took each individual member and you tried to see what it is they can do, you know, the range of talents in the ensemble is wide. One, you got Steve, and you know Alton Smith? Professional grade musicians. Then you’ve got another tier, who’re more than confident, knows all the songs, knows all the parts. Then you’ve got kind of a middle group, very confident, knows all the parts, but they’re still relying on the sheet music—you see ‘em, they plant their flags [music stands]. Then you’ve got a group that uses their sheet music, and they really have to rely on sheet music, ‘cause otherwise they just don’t know what the chords are, they don’t know the words. Then you’ve got a group that just has no clue. They’re not many, but there’re some who have no clue. And you get up there and you sing next to them and you can’t sing there, because they’re singing a part that just doesn’t exist. So that all gets put in the pot.

But like I said, you only hear what’s being amplified. So in general, the vocal microphones are sort of a free-for-all, it’s almost first-come-first-serve. But the guitar amplifiers—unless people are bringing their own, which happens a lot—for some gigs, there’s a PA and there’s only so many inputs to plug into [....] And so, and pretty much those are spoken for, and it’s kind of understood. It’s all understood that we all share the mics. (Yanaga interview 2005)

Although this inclusivity, the etiquette surrounding it, and the range of ability are readily identified as features of participatory traditions in Turino’s analysis, the Beatles Ensemble did not exhibit the sonic features that he argues such traditions generate to maximize a performance’s efficacy in involving many people. The Beatles repertoire exclusively comprises closed compositions and predetermined arrangements of parts, of course, which are typical features of presentational music. At the same time, the Beatles Ensemble’s performances did not exhibit all of the typical sonic features of presentational performance, either. The Ensemble’s diversity of skill level demanded some sort of cloaking, which was achieved through the
judicious manipulation of volume. Only some of the guitarists played electric guitars plugged into amps; the rest were on acoustic guitars, and were effectively drowned out in actual stage performance—they were subtly audible as a strumming body, but certainly no individual musician, or mistake, could be discerned. The selection process was informal, but it was clear to all involved that only the better players might plug in. The same applied to vocals; nearly everyone sang, but only a few sang into microphones—here, the hierarchy was more self-selected and more variable from performance to performance, but at least half of the singers at any one time were not really audible. The Beatles songs that they played were certainly jam-packed with musical variety to keep the listener interested and engaged, another key feature of presentational music. But what the Beatles Ensemble offered in its performances was actually predictability, the promise of meeting each expectation primed by the memory of the records.

Although I have stressed the group’s adherence to the original Beatles recordings as the source texts from which they perform, it should be obvious by now that they do not, in fact, sound like the Beatles. All the elements of the old favorites are there, assembled in the correct formation, but boisterously and untidily executed. However much attention is paid to the familiar nuances of the recordings, subtleties are inevitably lost in the crowd. After each performance, I would find myself hoarse, having sung at the top of my voice in unintentional competition with the other singers (miked or not) out of a desire to be heard. At my last performance with them, at Fox Lake, I felt like we had sung really well, but on viewing my videotape of it later, realized we had all been belting out the songs with little expressive range.

And yet, the Beatles Ensemble was very entertaining. Audiences always seem to enjoy their sets. Judy Davis laughingly yet seriously told me,

The reason I don’t think we can sound bad is ’cause we look so good! I mean, the enthusiasm—I don’t mean we’re good looking[.…] Everyone can feel the energy.
You’ve seen—you walk in that class, the energy is exploding! The energy is *Las Vegas*. Even for practice! So how can you lose? You know, even if a day we were a little bit off on our performance, people still run up and say, “You guys look like you’re having *so much fun!*” So I don’t know how good we have to be. But I think it always sounds pretty decent. (Davis interview 2005)

Members of the Beatles Ensemble themselves got immense pleasure out of performing.

Even the rehearsal experience could deliver entertainment value, through Levitt’s manipulation of it *as a performance.*

And actually class with him is in a sense kind of like a performance. Because I notice he’ll never let us leave on a down song. He’ll say, “Oh, we got seven minutes left, let’s do...such-and-such and such-and-such.” And always your second song is an upbeat song, he wants you to leave that room feeling like a million bucks. Now this is not something he’s ever said, it’s what I’ve observed. ‘Cause I leave there every time: “Woooo!” You know. And I said, “Why do I feel like ‘wooo’?” You know, I didn’t feel like “woo” the whole time. Well, he’s also a professional performer. He knows what he should do to make people feel *good.* (Davis interview 2005)

For many of them, this had been their first opportunity to play rock music for on stage, and for some, their first opportunity to perform any kind of music for an audience.

So I guess that even though the first time I was on stage I was in the back, sitting down, hiding behind people. Then they said you had to stand up and play. I said, “I can’t stand up and play, that’s crazy.” But that thrill of being up on stage, even though I was nervous and stuff. I never thought I would want to be a performer in any way. But then the bug hit me, and I’m like, “This is awesome!” Now I want to be front and center in a mike, with a lead... I’m turning into this creature that all of a sudden wants to perform, and I never knew it was inside of me. (Cohen interview 2005)

And indeed, the group’s performances sometimes could fulfill a sort of rock star fantasy. At Abbey Road on the River, the annual Beatles festival the Ensemble attended, they performed in a riverfront amphitheater in Cleveland. “We still got to play as a featured act on this huge stage—you know, with real tech guys and soundcheck and the whole thing. It was the kind of venue with the great big jumbotron over it, so the people in the back could see you[...].” So we kept
looking at it, like, ‘Look! We’re on that thing!’ [both laugh] So that was like being a real rock star, kind of” (Sayre interview 2005).

For audiences, the appeal of a Beatles Ensemble performance was, ironically, their non-Beatleness. “Clearly, we’re just people off the street. What we’re saying is that anyone can pick up an instrument and participate” (Yanaga interview 2005). The group occupied a category of its own among the Beatles cover bands at Abbey Road on the River.

BY: And there are fifty bands, and forty of them were all wearing black suits and ties and they’re trying to look like them and play like [the Beatles]. And after you’ve seen the first three groups, well, ok. And there are a lot of groups like that in the Chicago area as well. So we have a niche that we fill OK.

TL: And possibly fill it…alone.

BY: What do you mean? Oh yeah, there’s no other group like us! […] I’ve never heard of one, no. We’re kind of like the “up with people” group. (Yanaga interview 2005)

What set the Beatles Ensemble apart from those cover bands, where the musicians masquerade as their source band, or for that matter, karaoke, where individuals express a moment of personal stardom through the conduit of a favorite pop song, was its collective anonymity. Of course to many in the audience—family, co-workers, significant others—the musicians on stage might be very specific people indeed, but there was neither any attempt to portray John, Paul, George and Ringo, nor any attempt to celebrate individual creativity or charisma. What they were performing for their audiences was participatory experience itself. Physically, rather than performing the Beatles band as charismatic icons, the Beatles Ensemble performed themselves, a participatory collective of largely middle-aged amateur musicians. They represented participation, and what the audience would see was a representation of their potential selves.
Beatle-ology. By any common sense measure, the Beatles Ensemble has been a huge success. Its size, longevity, the strength of the social bonds among members, and the pleasure its music-making imparts all attest to its success—it even makes a little money. As the largest and most accessible of the recording-based ensembles at OTSFM, it tends to serve as a feeder group for the others, occupying a central position in a sort of extended clan. The crossover between the ensembles was observable at various performances, and Bill Brickey, co-teacher of the Soul Ensemble, confirmed, “It’s the same people. A lot of the same people. More so than before, a lot of people from Steve’s Grateful Dead and Beatles Ensembles are showing up” (Brickey interview 2005). For Levitt, the Beatles Ensemble’s ubiquity was framing his entire Old Town School experience.

The Beatles Ensemble now has become the core of at least ten other ensembles…Alton’s Soul Ensemble, the Floating Rock Ensemble. Every class I have is now a Beatles Ensemble class. [...] That group of people that first coalesced there has gone on to coalesce so many other things, that it’s hard for me to say where the Beatles Ensemble stops and anything else I do takes up. [...] Go to Madagascar, to this tiny little class—but there’s a Beatles Ensemble member there. “Guys, you gotta check this out!” Because it’s just the big thing. It’s taken my persona on, it’s become the thing that I do. And it informed everything else that I do, so that everything is an offshoot of the Beatles Ensemble. And it does not bother me at all. It’s the way it is now! (Levitt interview 2005a)

From the student perspective, however, the ensembles seemed quite distinct. “It’s apples and oranges,” Michael Mann said about comparing his experiences with the Soul Ensemble and with the Beatles Ensemble; for one thing, “it’s a class, it’s not a band—[Smith’s and Brickey’s] job as teachers is fairly well-defined. And everybody gets to participate [i.e., no one is lost in the crowd]” (Mann interview 2005). Judy Davis, who was always more of a soul and R&B fan than a Beatles fan, loved being in the Soul Ensemble’s audience, but felt their attitude towards performing was too far from the one she preferred with the Beatles Ensemble. “I mean, they’re cool, they’re wonderful[...] I’m gonna watch ‘em. But I’m a little intimidated by Soul
Ensemble. [pause] They seem to be really, really, really serious about it[....] Ah, come on, they get that serious, I can’t do it. I probably could! But no. I don’t wanna be that serious” (Davis interview 2005). On the other hand, the smaller size of all of the other ensembles had obvious advantages, as Marla Cohen pointed out.

But I love Grateful Dead. I love the fact that the Beatles is huge and big, but I also like the fact the Grateful Dead is small. Like I said, I think it’s so cool that when we [the Beatles Ensemble] get up on stage, that this looks unbelievable. Then I also like that, “Oh cool, there are only seven people here, we’re going to be able to be heard.” Even if you mess up, you’re going to be able to be heard and seen and whatever. I guess it’s my ego, it’s a bad thing [laughs]. I guess if you’re performing, everyone’s got one, right? (Cohen interview 2005)

My final experience with the Beatles Ensemble was a demonstration of how closely these ensembles were related, socially as well as musically. On a Saturday in August, one of the ensemble students hosted “The Fourth Annual Fox Lake OTS Ensemble Bash!” at his summer house north of Chicago. The Grateful Dead Ensemble, The Floating Rock Ensemble (doing Counting Crows songs that session), the Lunar Ensemble (working on Dylan’s Basement Tapes, a multi-session endeavor), the Elvis Costello Ensemble and the Soul Ensemble all performed, along with a one-time revival of the Warren Zevon Ensemble, a defunct group that had “self-activated” a couple of years earlier, and B5ive, an independent band made up of graduates of the Band Ensemble. A small stage area had been set up, complete with PA system, and each of the eight groups was given an hour, enough time to play through the entire album or set of songs they had covered that session. Many of the students brought their families and there were drinks on offer throughout, a well-stocked grill, a vast potluck, a campfire after dark, and as an unanticipated treat, a fireworks show over the lake, courtesy of one of the neighbors. The hosts had even rented portable outhouses. The weather was perfect and spirits were high, and music
extended from 1:00 pm until midnight or later; it could not have been clearer that all of these people were connected through the same network of musical friendships.

Janet Sayre, who joined the Beatles Ensemble in 2002, worked in the OTSFM administrative office, and thus had been privy and participant to bemused conversations upstairs with David Roche and others about the Beatles Ensemble’s influence and distinctive success. Through these conversations, probed further in conversation with me, Sayre formulated a five-part Beatles Ensemble “recipe.” The first ingredient: Steve Levitt, for his gifts as a teacher and a “human jukebox.” Her second ingredient was the Beatles music, a body of work that can stand up to repetition. Third was “benign neglect”; although the administration had at times fretted over how to cope with this unorthodox class, it had settled on a hands-off approach. “I think not being institutionalized is part of the recipe here.” In the course of our interview, Sayre arrived at a fourth ingredient: the Beatles Ensemble’s long-term plan running several sessions ahead. A fifth element Sayre mentioned could also be considered an ingredient in the recipe: Beatle-for-life status. As this chapter has demonstrated, many of the OTSFM ensembles cultivate a community that extends beyond the classroom, but, by 2005 at least, I was unaware of any that formalized a permanent membership the way that the Beatles Ensemble did through their email list, drop-in gigs, and Beatle Camp.

Underlying this is a certain shared philosophy, which Levitt traces directly to the Beatles themselves—a “Beatle-ology.”

The Beatles music always has messages of hope and love and we can work this out. And because I have that totem, and because we all have that totem to look at, when we look for a solution, and there’s something—I think we have a concerted effort inside us, the clan is motivated by some kind of strange, unspoken Beatle-ology. [TL laughs] That none of us are really…nobody created it, but we all agree with it. The Beatles music sinks in deep, you know. And you go, “Yeah, that’s true, that’s true.” What they say is true. It’s not necessarily all true that all you need is love, but in some cases, it’s worth mentioning that. That there is a
truth there. And there’s, you know all these things in there…Now the Beatles themselves had their own time limits, you know, so I never assumed that we would last forever, I just thought, well, let’s stay together. If we’ve got a problem, just let’s see. (Levitt interview 2005a)

Conclusion

These two chapters have been about clans, about constellations of musical friendships, brought together around a particular musical values, practices, tastes and repertoire. The Spontaneous Folk Ensemble and Beatles Ensemble Clans represent contrasting approaches to building such relationships, but they were far from the only models at the Old Town School. I have made mention of many of the other ensembles that at least shared borders with these two clans, such as the Old Time Ensemble and the Soul Ensemble. But there were many that occupied completely separate territory. These included clans centered on dance classes, like Belly Dancing or Clog Dancing; Rebecca Epstein, a young woman in my Vocal Harmony class, had found a circle of friends when she moved to Chicago from Austin by signing up for the Clog Dancing class (Epstein interview 2005). There was a small, tight-knit flamenco clan that incorporated guitarists, dancers and singers. A few years before I did fieldwork, a hula clan, incorporating dancers, drummers, ukulele players and others, swelled, bonded and then dissipated when the teacher left. A mariachi clan appeared to be emergent in late 2005. In this chapter, I have largely neglected those clans oriented around dance, and those that coalesced around an ethnic tradition foreign to most of the members. These bring up a host of other issues, to do with embodiment, race and representation, which I look forward to investigating more deeply at a later time.

Of course, not all ensemble classes become clans—far from it—nor do all teachers want to deal with the social intensity that comes with one. Jimmy Tomasello, for example,
consciously avoided the phenomenon after his experience with the Dylan Ensemble in the early 1990s by alternating it with his Rolling Stones Ensemble, so that students could not linger in either one.

The Stones Ensemble I just teach in the fall. So I only do two sessions of that because I...[little groaning noise] First of all, I don’t want to have something happen like the Beatles Ensemble. [TL laughs] Because I had that happen with the Dylan Ensemble and it just got really weird. It just got strange, you know? [...] It was just too hard to handle! I just didn’t want to deal with it. The egos and everything in there. Everybody was like, I wanna do this, I wanna do that. And people’d been together for a year and a half, or two years, whatever it was, and it was just like there were these fights and these issues and these affairs and these things. And it was just like, “Nah, man! I just wanna play some tunes here! Come on!” [both laugh] So I said [handclap] I’m gonna close the Bob Dylan Ensemble for a while. And now I rotate ‘em. (Tomasello interview 2005b)

Tomasello also saw an advantage to holding back: keeping the class fresh. “Though people always ask, ‘Oh, when you gonna do that again, when you gonna do that again?’ If you just offer it a couple of times, then people make an effort to take it, instead of saying, ‘Aw, they always have that class’ (ibid.) It takes a great deal of patience, personal investment, and attention to social dynamics to successfully steer a clan through the ego-ridden anxieties that music has the potential to amplify—not just on the part of the teachers, though Mark Dvorak, Steve Levitt, and Arlo Leach more than rose to the occasion—but from a plurality of members willing to show leadership.

Although I have avoided using the “ethnographic present” throughout this dissertation, instead opting for an equally artificial past tense, describing them as they existed during one calendar year still may imply more constancy than was there. In fact these ensembles and their surrounding clans are in constant flux. Nothing is static—like Steve Levitt said, clans are “volcanoes.” In the short time I was there, the Jug Band went from a new class to a performing phenomenon; the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble shrank dramatically from winter to spring and was
moved from the spacious Gallery to a small basement classroom by fall. The Hump Night Thumpers stayed together after I left, gaining attention around the city, winning the national Battle of the Jug Bands in 2007 and credited by the Chicago Tribune with spearheading a Chicago jug band revival (Guarino 2009). Leach moved to Oregon in 2009, but the Thumpers have apparently regrouped around a new teacher, Jonas Friddle, retaining several long-term members, though all of the original group has moved on. The Spontaneous Folk Ensemble has been renamed the “Tuesday Folk Ensemble,” still taught by Mark Dvorak, who is also still coordinating the weekly Grafton Folk Club. The Pickin’ Bubs are still together, too, and maintain an active MySpace page with recent recordings posted. Steve Levitt is still teaching the Beatles Ensemble, now in its sixteenth year, and most of the core people I got to know are still involved, staying connected through a Facebook group; Michael Mann and Tom Ryan are now teachers in the guitar program, however, and a “Beatles for Beginners” class has been added, taught by long-time OTSFM guitar and songwriting teacher Charles Kim.

In my standard set of interview questions, whether for students or staff, I almost always asked, “Is the Old Town School a community?” By late May, I had noted to myself in my fieldnotes that it “now seems like kind of a dumb question” (Fieldnotes for May 24, 2005). By then, I myself was experiencing a strong sense of community, coming to the School nearly every day, seeing familiar faces among students, teachers, front desk staff, administrators, and volunteers, and developing real friendships with quite a few of them. And indeed, most of the people I interviewed also felt that some kind of community was self-evident within the walls of the School. However, their feelings of belonging to that (or a) community varied considerably. Unsurprisingly, those who had been at the School the longest tended to feel stronger personal bonds than those who were dabbling for a few months, not committed to long-term involvement.
Without a doubt, those who became involved in one clan or another were much more likely to make meaningful connections with others, and often very quickly. These friendships could easily lead to connections outside the School, like rooming together, dating, etc., deepening the individual’s connection both the School as an institution, to the musical activity being shared, as well as to his or her new friends.

But they did not necessarily lead to clan cross-fertilization within the School. Some individuals shifted easily between clans—Janet Sayre kept one foot in the Old Time Ensemble during her years with the Beatles Ensemble (though she could not take both simultaneously) and was contemplating starting the Torch Songs class. But ironically, it was the strength of clan members’ affirmations that OTSFM constituted a community in which most people did cross paths that placed doubt in my mind that it was so; not only were they not actually crossing paths with people in unrelated clans, they did not seem aware of all the people they were missing. To Polly Parnell, her Old Town School social life was varied and rich, yet of a whole.

TL: Do you find that the people you know here are all interconnected, or do you find that you have different circles of friends within the Old Town School?

PP: Oh, no, I think they’re all interconnected. I really do. I come in for Jug Band night, and Mark and some of his friends are sitting downstairs singing in the lobby, and you know, it’s—I think they’re all interconnected. I don’t feel like they’re disconnected. I think they’re all interconnected. And even when you go over to volunteer with the Folk & Roots Festival, everybody’s over there! And they’re all connected somehow. (Parnell interview 2005)

Yet I cannot recall seeing members of the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble clan interacting with members of the Beatles clan, or individuals in one mentioning individuals in the other, though of course they would see each other around the building and at some events. I certainly did not see evidence of people in either of these clans having any relationships with the members of the hula, flamenco, or bellydancing clans, to name a few. Although they might have seen each other
perform at graduations (depending on their respective schedules), and did seem to share the overarching Old Town School participatory ethos, they otherwise might as well have been in different worlds. This is hardly surprising in a school of 6,000 students and 250 teachers.

Why are clans important? On the pragmatic level, the fact that the Old Town School can sustain ensembles, not only as somewhat formal spaces for practicing and performing a particular repertoire, but also as social entities, even intermittent participation of many of the individual members is of great value in encouraging adult music-making and facilitating access.

They all want the same thing: they want a cool band. Without the heartbreak that goes into actually forming a band. It’s a sort of a…But yet it’s not just a rent-a-band. ‘Cause these guys have played together for years, some of ‘em. It’s not just a rent-a-band, these guys have established a relationship, and yet they’ve done it knowing that the relationship with the School gives it underpinning so that if someone were to stop coming for a while, it’s OK, they don’t destroy the band. Which is one of the hardest things I think about being in a band: feeling that, of having to be responsible for the band. I mean, if I just need to wig out here, are you guys just gonna fold up without me? Or are you gonna find someone else? And hate me forever? (Levitt interview 2005a)

The structure that OTSFM provides for sustaining musical ensembles like these seems unique.

But there is something deeper here as well. Steve Levitt borrowed the familial term “clans” to describe the social networks bound simultaneously by music and friendship that have grown up around various classes at the Old Town School. A usefully descriptive term, as he defines it, it still cannot deliver the musical connotation without a modifier or additional explanation, nor can Finnegan’s “pathways” or Turino’s “cohorts.” And what do we call relationships like the one that Maury Lally, Peggy Brown and Mark Mitchell share, as the Pickin’ Bubs? While they are certainly part of the larger Spontaneous Folk Clan, the three of them share a much closer bond of friendship, which cannot be understood separately from their relationship as musicians. I hope that, if nothing else, this examination of the musical-social
lives of these groups of amateur musicians can shed light on the structural requirements of such musical friendships, and the processes through which they are formed.
CHAPTER 10
CONCLUSION

“The Old Town School of Folk Music saved my life.” I had been talking with Janet Sayre on the record for over an hour—it had been a pleasant and interesting but undramatic interview—when I asked her one of my standard concluding questions: “What has your involvement at the School done for you personally? How is your life different, and your musical experience different than before?” She replied almost casually. “I kind of forgot this, but there was a while there, in the 1998-2001 period, that I was saying to people, the Old Town School of Folk Music saved my life.” In 1998 Janet experienced the devastating loss of her entire family when her parents drowned on a vacation to the Galapagos Islands. “After that, I…I didn’t do anything for a month[….] And as soon as I could think again, I came back here and I became…it became more the focus of my life” (Sayre interview 2005).

It is surely clear by now that becoming involved in the Old Town School, musically and socially, has been beneficial to many. It is worth taking a moment to emphasize just how profoundly it has changed some people’s lives. For Janet Sayre, it not only buoyed her through her grief, but gave her an entirely new direction in life. One of the first classes Janet Sayre enrolled in after her parents’ death was Mark Dvorak’s American Troubadors class. “It was the Pete Seeger ‘Where Have All the Flowers Gone’ era. So I’d be, like, weeping in Mark’s class, you know? ‘Cause my mother was a big fan of the Weavers. But it was OK…. So it became actual therapy at that point.” Soon she became involved with the Old Time Ensemble, then the Beatles Ensemble. By this time, Janet had become so committed to the Old Town School that she wanted to work there. After eight years working at Argonne National Laboratory, she quit and took an unpaid internship at OTSF in 2003. “I had submitted my resume for various
positions before, and then I was like, well this time I’m gonna do it. Because I’m sitting here and my face is here in the office for eight months and someone’s gonna hire me. So they did [laughs].” In August of that year, she accepted a full-time position as Development Associate, and the institution that had offered her aid in a time of extraordinary need became the source of her everyday sustenance.

You know it’s entirely possible that if you’re me, and you’re in this job at Argonne that you don’t necessarily love, but it’s OK, you’re an only child, you live alone. Suddenly your family is wiped out. People don’t always recover from that. You could start drinking, it could be a downward spiral. I could have decided to walk away from that job with no real plan and anything could have happened, really. But I started coming here in a more serious way, like two classes at once, something to do, to not be in the house and not be in my own head. And not be alone. I mean really I never left[…] Maybe that’s my story. That I signed up as soon as I could think and never looked back. So, in a very serious way, for a couple years there, it was…the key to my existence. (Sayre interview 2005)

For many people, the life-changing element is simply finding a way to integrate music into their lives. Playing music had been a central part of Polly Parnell’s life when she was younger, but it had fallen away until she began going to the Old Town School.

PP: And then you know what I found out? That I had really, really, really missed it. And I didn’t realize what a hole there was in my life that I wasn’t out singing and playing again. So I guess that was really how it changed my life, and now I’m just kind of determined to keep it going.

TL: Do you think you might have revived the music in your life without the School?

PP: No. I don’t really think I would have. I don’t. I think this is really—it revived all my music[…] It’s been so nice because now when somebody at my house picks up the guitar or starts playing the piano, somebody comes in with you and your jamming, you know? It’s kind of nice! It’s kind of the way I always pictured it was gonna be. So that’s how it is now. (Parnell interview 2005)

Often, of course, OTSFM changes lives simply by providing what it promises to: musical knowledge and skills. Some people come in order to advance a particular goal—like Steve
Keefe, who wanted to improve his ukulele skills to start a post-retirement career as a children’s musician working with schools—and leave having done just that (Gaines and Keefe interview 2005). Usually, the application for the knowledge is less direct, but equally meaningful.

Neil Donovan: Certainly I have a much better understanding of what I’m doing when I play. Both the physical act of playing, but also the theoretical…I’ve also learned a lot more about music history, folk music history because that’s what we’re doing mostly, is folk music. But how everything fits in a bigger picture. It definitely has opened up my mind a lot.

Ellen Shriver: I think it has given us more…you get little nuggets from each class, of things to look for. The next thing to look into, the next thing to look up on the Internet or the library. You learn names of people who’d be interesting to listen to. So that broadens your mind, and your musical…experience. Also, having finally taken lessons in an instrument, the fiddle, with that class I had to actually—my music theory really was like nothing[…] I can’t say that I know it, but I’m getting better at figuring out what note I’m actually playing. Because before, being more self-taught, it was all instinctual. So I knew that the next note was higher or lower, but I didn’t know what it was, necessarily. Or how to get there. And so that’s helped me a lot. And it’s just—the whole experience has been a growing, mind-opening experience. (Donovan and Shriver interview 2005)

Skip Landt credited OTSFM with leading him to a much broader understanding of what folk music could be than he might have found through other organizations. “I think it’s almost like being on the floor of a house, and suddenly discovering there’s this huge basement that you didn’t know about. Maybe before that you knew there was a wine cellar or something, but then discovering there’s this huge underground area filled with interesting people and activities and music and dance” (Landt interview 2005).

A number of people I interviewed, especially women, found that their Old Town School approach to learning gave them confidence and courage that could resonate far beyond their musical lives. “Now I’m pretty fearless,” Amy Rasmussen said. “I feel freed, you feel freed from the constraints of always having to play in tune, always having to have every note right. It’s
about what does it sound like, is it fun and do you like it? Can you connect with the music you’re playing? That’s huge” (Rasmussen interview 2005).

Well, it’s changed everything. I told you, everything. Every concept. Absolutely. It’s tremendous. If you would’ve said, “Judy, one day, you’re gonna buy a guitar, and the next thing you know, you’re gonna own a business and then join an orchestra.” I would say, “Are you outta your mind!” But that’s really what developed! So that’s the major change, that everything—not just music—everything around me. (Davis interview 2005)

Judy Davis was working for an employment service when she first joined the Beatles Ensemble; within a year, she had become the business owner, a leap of faith she said she would not have taken without her Old Town School experience. “I thought, I don’t know how to do anything, about how to do the books, how to pay the taxes. I said, well I didn’t know how to play the guitar before, either! It’s just a matter of, somebody will show you what to do, and then you’re gonna do it. But whether you do it well or not, I don’t know. But you’re gonna do it!” (ibid.).

People discover new identities through the work they do at the School to become “musicians.” Amateurs are often shy about using what is usually considered a professional label to describe themselves, and to take it on can represent a major shift in self-perception. Marla Cohen had not played music before adulthood, but worked hard on guitar and gradually realized what she had achieved. “‘Musician’ to me is on a pedestal, I guess, and it’s hard to say ‘Yeah, I am’ but I guess I am, which is kinda cool” (Cohen interview 2005). For those who make their careers at OTSFM, not only the music but the institution itself becomes part of their identity.

“[On a] practical level, it’s a thing that…gives me a reason to get up in the morning, in a way, even though I only teach two days a week, I’m always thinking about it,” Mark Dvorak told me. “I think who I am is intimately wrapped up with my experiences at the Old Town School.” For Dvorak, that means being part of a story much larger than himself.
And then you realize, well here I am working with people under this, as this has unfolded over the last forty-five years. Well I think there’s something meaningful in that. I feel a clearer sense of purpose because of it—that’s a good way to say it. I feel a clear sense of purpose. I’m doing Win’s work. I feel that. And I don’t mean that…I only mean it as it is. This was an idea a guy had, and I think I agree with his idea, and so sign me up, you know? (Dvorak interview 2005).

This dissertation has been liberally laced with the biographies of the individuals who have come together over the decades to create and sustain the Old Town School. Overall, I have seen my role as the “biographer” of the institution: finding the patterns and structures that bring individual efforts into harmony with one another.

I have traced the School’s roots back through the twentieth century to Chicago’s distinctive legacy of progressive grassroots arts and educational institutions; the youthful peregrinations of its founders in the hobo and song-hunting traditions; the political mission of the Folk Song Movement in the context of Popular Front labor politics; and many other feeding tributaries. I have noted developments in American music and society that affected the School’s fortunes throughout the years since it opened. Together, these narrative threads show how the Old Town School’s story, while thoroughly unique, was also interconnected with those of likeminded individuals in wider networks and implicated in much larger strands of American history. The fundamental ethos that OTSFM has maintained at its core emerges from these roots. Although its practical execution has changed over time, this ethos has consistently valued music as a participatory, social activity that ought to be equally accessible to all, regardless of talent or origins, and has promoted an educational approach that prioritizes oral learning and appreciation for social and historical context, while discouraging competitive or judgmental attitudes.

After an astonishing period of growth in the 1980s and 1990s, OTSFM had reached a point of organizational stability by the turn of the millenium. By this time, in addition to a
thriving educational program covering a very diverse range of instrumental music, vocal music and dance traditions from North America and beyond, OTSFM was supporting a year-round concert series, an outdoor Folk and Roots Festival, an outreach program in the public schools, a specific concert/workshop series targeted at Latino and African American audiences, a music store, a music library and a café. Tens of thousands of Chicagoans were passing through the doors of the School’s two locations each year to take part. The sheer number of students and teachers ensured great diversity in teaching and learning styles, largely but imperfectly adhering to the OTSFM ethos and approach. The School’s distinctive tradition of the Second Half had continued uninterrupted since the 1950s, though its size compromised the old intimacy of the participatory experience, and the greater diversity of instruments now taught at the School complicated the guitar-centric orientation of the event. Meanwhile, new traditions were emerging from some of the ensemble classes started in the 1990s, encouraging the formation of musical “clans” that facilitated the creation and sustenance of musical friendships among students.

I heard a variety of metaphors used to describe the affective role the Old Town School played in people’s lives. Janet Sayre clarified that the comfort she drew from the School was not actually based in her relationships with specific individuals, but was something she found in the institution itself (Sayre interview 2005). To some, it was a “family,” not only in the sense of the close ties and familiarity among the people within it, but also in those individuals’ consciousness that they belonged to a certain lineage, going back to Win Stracke, Frank Hamilton, and the folk musicians before them (Brown, Lally and Mitchell interview 2005). To Michael Mann, it was “a positive force”—the strongest one he had ever come across—and “a safe haven” (Mann
interview 2005). More than one person compared their weekly visit to the Old Town School with going to church, complete with ritual singing.

It is kind of like a little cult thing. I equate to a friend of mine who decided to become—she found God, or whatever it was. She does kinda what I do. She’s at her church three or four nights a week, sees people on the weekends. So your salvation is wherever you find it, right? Not that anybody’s been saved, but I think it could be an interesting point for your thesis (Rasmussen interview 2005)

David Roche called it “a church of folk music, but it’s a church that’s more of a…a Society of Friends, rather than Roman Catholic” (Roche interview 2005a). Mark Dvorak found the religious aspect in “our own sense of exchange, as humans. It’s kind of religious in a way. I mean, it’s an exchange of intimacy, in artistic terms, musical terms. For fun! That’s how it’s different than religion” (Dvorak interview 2005). All of these metaphors speak to how it important it was to play music at the Old Town School as a regular, consistent, even ritualized practice, to maintain that practice in a “third place” separate from other parts of their lives and to find a sense of communal belonging in that predictability.

The value that the Old Town School holds for its community (or rather, communities) is thus felt on an emotional, affective level through meaningful human interaction, but is only made possible through the creation and careful maintenance of a strong institutional structure.

TL: So in other words—and I’ll put this sort of in my words—creating a secure and functioning institutional structure facilitated the flow of the kinds of music and community making that you wanted to have had there all along.

Jim Hirsch: In fact, I wish I had said that. [TL laughs.] No, that’s exactly right. I mean, you look at these things, and you look at what they were back in the eighties and it’s all there. You almost don’t even have to ask any other questions. We were able to serve more people better than we ever could before. And if you believe to some degree that there’s a missionary element to that kind of work, where part of the job is to in fact introduce new people—clearly, much, much, much, much, much better at the end than we were at the beginning. (Hirsch interview 2005)
Though long, this dissertation leaves much in the Old Town School’s present and past untouched and many doors open for future research and analysis. The individuals that I interviewed obviously represented only a fraction of the range of experiences and perspectives to be found there; some of the people I did interview have even been omitted in a vain attempt at brevity. With no background in dance or dance scholarship, I have left the significant role of dance at OTSF mostly untouched. The experiences of children, who constitute close to half the enrollment there, fell entirely outside the scope of this work. There are of course many musical traditions taught at the School that I have ignored.

Many topics that I did address, at least in passing, deserve a more complete report and closer analysis. The story of “world music” at the Old Town School, for example, has yet to be told in detail, though I did touch on it in Chapter 5 in the context of the School’s strategies for growth in the 1980s. A history of the development of a curriculum in non-Western music in a predominantly white institution and ethnographic attention to the practices within such a setting would enhance the existing studies of the world music phenomenon that concentrate on consumers’ listening practices, rather than active engagement with learning to play, and could conceivably provide an interesting counterpoint to examinations of similar educational programs in university ethnomusicology programs. A more penetrating analysis of race than I provided here is very much called for. Although the story I tell here sheds some light on specific challenges to and contradictions within organizational strategies to “diversify,” and I hope that I have helped make the whiteness of the Old Town School more visible, a deeper discussion of the changing discourses of “race” and “folk” and the intersection of the two within the context of the folk revival is needed, as is a more ethnographically focused examination of the effects of institutional diversification efforts in music.
Further theorization of musical friendships and clans, and ethnographic investigations of such phenomena, would surely be fruitful. For example, what specific behaviors in musical performance promote (or discourage) the creation of such relationships? What distinctive benefits or effects do relationships based primarily on musical interaction produce? How does the musical affinity that individuals find in one another relate to their other tastes and lifestyle choices? Are there other ways to frame affective relationships based on the mode of social interaction in which they are constituted? Why, in fact, do we not already have the tools in the English language to conceptualize such relationships more easily?

Most obviously, the stories in these pages need to be updated. More than five years have passed since I completed my fieldwork and lives have not stopped changing; I am very interested to know how my interviewees’ relationships with the Old Town School, with each other, and with the music that they play has evolved over the years. OTSFM is well into a new era of leadership under Bau Graves, and as I write, an entirely new facility is under construction across the street from the Hild Library building, to open in August 2011. With 27,100 square feet of new classroom, performance and social space, it will add capacity for a 4,800 more students per week and create for the first time what could legitimately be called a “campus” for the Old Town School. What will this mean for the character of the institution?

The mission of the Old Town School of Folk Music has always been simultaneously humble and grand. Its conception of folk music as “people’s music” embraces the simplest forms of musical expression as equal in value to the most complex, but that same concept carries the implication that the School is therefore responsible for providing access to all people. Despite admirable, ongoing and often successful efforts to open its doors ever wider, this will never be possible; the Old Town School’s reach will always be limited. It is my hope that my
work here, however, can bring some of the lessons of Old Town School to others who wish to foster participatory music making. OTSFM’s core ethical orientation and the specific, practical, pedagogical strategies it has refined over the years have created a model of remarkable sustainability, one in which others with similar organizational goals in different social settings can find inspiration, with or without the historically loaded label of “folk music.”

Legacies of the mid-century American folk revival can be traced in many strands of musical life today, from repertoire to style, from marketing categories to understandings of American history. One of its more profound legacies is the opening up of a space within middle-class, consumerist society for participatory music making, providing both the tools and the ethos for a non-professionalized approach that can still be taken seriously. Christopher Small, speaking of his concept of music in general as a holistic social process of sound creation, declares:

[A]ll musicking is serious musicking. Whoever engages in a musical performance, of whatever kind, is saying to themselves and to anyone who may be taking notice, This is who we are, and that is a serious affirmation indeed. All those who engage in musicking are engaging in a very serious activity. The pieces that are played may be judged as frivolous […] but the act of performing is never so. And if all musicking is serious musicking, then no way of musicking is intrinsically better than any other; all are to be judged, if they are to be judged at all, on their success in articulating (affirming, exploring, celebrating) the concepts of relationships of those who are taking part. (Small 1998, 212, emphasis in the original)

In these terms, the Old Town School is a resounding success.
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APPENDIX A

MAPS

Key Locations in Chicago
Pertinent to Old Town School History

Chicago

Irish American Heritage Center: OTSFM, 1987

Lincoln Square (see p. 559)

Lincoln Park (see p. 558)

Oak Park

The Loop (Downtown Chicago)

University of Chicago

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Modifications by the author
Lincoln Square

4544 N. Lincoln Avenue: OTSFM, 1998 - present

Lincoln Square shopping area

Sulzer Regional Library

Welles Park

Lawrence Avenue

Montrose Avenue

Ravenswood Avenue

Western Avenue
APPENDIX B

TIMELINE

Chronology of Old Town School history and other events mentioned. Italics indicate events occurring outside of OTSFM.

1893
William “Big Bill” Broonzy born in Mississippi

1908
Win Stracke born in Kansas; moves to Chicago about 2 years later

1920
Broonzy moves to Chicago

1926
Stracke’s wander through the American West

1927
Carl Sandburg publishes American Songbag

1928
Ted Johnson born

1931
Bob Gibson born, New York
Stracke sings on WLS Radio’s National Barn Dance

1934
Frank Hamilton born, New York City; grew up in Los Angeles

1938
Stracke becomes involved with Chicago Repertory Group; meets Studs Terkel and Gertrude Soltker

1941
Almanac Singers formed by Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Lampell, John Peter Hawes, Bess Lomax Hawes

Early 1940s
Stracke serves in World War II

1945
People’s Songs founded
1946
Chicago chapter of People’s Songs organized, led by Stracke
David Roche born, Chappaqua, NY

1947
“I Come For To Sing” folk song series developed by Studs Terkel, Win Stracke, Big Bill Broonzy and Laurence Lane; tours Midwestern college campuses and plays for years at the Blue Note nightclub

1949
Hamilton first meets the Sierra Folksingers in L.A.; soon begins singing with them, then meets Will Geer, Woody Guthrie, the Weavers, etc., over the next few years

1950
“Stud’s Place,” starring Studs Terkel, Win Stracke, Chet Roble and Beverly Younger, begins broadcast on NBC television

1951
Broonzy tours Europe, promoted as the last of the great blues singers
The Hawes move to Los Angeles

1952
Steve Levitt born

1953
Frank Hamilton hits the road with Jack Elliott and Guy Carawan to tour the American South
Win Stracke’s television program “Animal Playtime” airs nationally on NBC, for one year; later returns as local program on ABC

1954
Jim Hirsch born
Michael Miles born

1955
The Weavers reunite
Bob Gibson arrives in Chicago
Dawn Greening becomes first becomes involves in the Chicago folk music scene
Jimmy Tomasello born

1956
Gate of Horn nightclub opens on Chicago’s Near North Side
Frank Hamilton moves to Chicago, after shuttling between L.A. and New York City for a couple of years

1957
Summer: Frank Hamilton teaches group classes in the Greening home in Oak Park
November 29: Opening Night of the Old Town School of Folk Music
December: Classes begin in Immigrant State Bank Building, 333 North Avenue

Mark Dvorak born

1958
OTSF M has 160-200 students
Ted Johnson, Jack Tangerman, others hired as teachers
August 14 (or 15?): Big Bill Broonzy dies of throat cancer
Roger McGuinn begins guitar classes at OTSF M as teenager
Pete Seeger leaves the Weavers to pursue solo career
Club 47 opens in Cambridge, MA
Late in year: Kingston Trio's recording of “Tom Dooley” tops the charts

1959
John Carbo hired as banjo teacher
"I Come For to Sing" show ends at the Blue Note
Summer: First Newport Folk Festival (Newport, RI), Bob Gibson introduces Joan Baez

1960
Gertrude Soltker leaves the Old Town School
Fleming Brown hired to teach banjo
Nate Lofton begins teaching weekly folk dance club

1961
February: The first University of Chicago Folk Festival is held
December: Old Town School begins participating in Las Posadas in neighborhood

1962
Frank Hamilton leaves the Old Town School to join the Weavers
Ray Tate moves to Chicago and starts playing in the folk music scene (approx. date)
Ray Tate is hired to teach at the Old Town School and in ’62 or ’63, replaces Hamilton as Dean of Faculty

1963
March: The Old Town Folk Lore Center opens next door to the School and affiliated with it
Frank Hamilton leaves the Weavers and moves back to Los Angeles (or 1964)
Old Town Folklore Center opens next door to Old Town School
Roger McGuinn begins playing Beatles songs in Greenwich Village before joining the Byrds

1964
The Weavers disband
The Beatles tour the U.S. for the first time, igniting Beatlemania

1965
Ted Johnson leaves OTSF M to teach English at Michigan State University
Win Stracke and Norm Luboff publish Songs of Man, illustrated songbook
Steve Levitt first takes classes at OTSFM as a teenager. 

The Byrds’ version of Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man” reaches #1 on the charts, launching “folk-rock”

July 25: Dylan goes electric at the Newport Folk Festival

1966

*Earl of Old Town folk club opens in Old Town neighborhood*

1967

The Old Town School moves to 909 W. Armitage; original building in Old Town is demolished

The Old Town School celebrates its tenth anniversary with, among other things, the publication of Stracke’s account of the School’s history

1968

Illinois Sesquicentennial: composition commissioned from Stracke and Luboff; Stracke performs in Springfield

1969

OTSFM enrollment is at about 360

Dawn Greening retires from administrative duties at Old Town School

Win Stracke retires from directing the Old Town School and is replaced by Ray Tate

*End of Newport Folk Festival? (Revived in 1985)*

*Club 47 closes?*

1970

1971? Jim Hirsch first hired to teach guitar

1972

Jimmy Tomasello takes first OTSFM lessons as a high school student

1973

Jimmy Tomasello first volunteers at OTSFM, then begins working part-time at the music store

1975

OTSFM begins publishing the folk music journal *Come For To Sing*

Fleming Brown is interviewed for *Come For To Sing*

Somewhere around here, Skokie branch opens, later moves to Evanston

1976

Ray Tate is interviewed for *Come For To Sing*

Bicentennial celebrations

Steve Levitt, Chris Farrell and others play in bicentennial band affiliated with OTSFM, Ravenswood
1977
OTSFM reportedly operating in the red.

1978
Mark Dvorak first comes to OTSFM as a student

1979
Michael Miles hired to teach banjo
Skip Landt first takes a class at OTSFM

1980
*Come for to Sing* severs ties with OTSFM
Dawn Greening leaves Chicago

1982
Ray Tate resigns as director
Jim Hirsch is hired by the Board as director

1984
OTSFM receives NEA grant
Michael Miles hired as program director

1985
First Hispanic Music Festival held
OTSFM launches first capital campaign, for building renovation
Kathy Lahiff starts Wiggleworms program
Skip Landt begins teaching harmonica
Hild Regional Library building is left empty when Sulzer Regional Library opens in Lincoln Square
*Come for to Sing* ceases publication

1986
Mark Dvorak joins OTSFM teaching staff

1987
Armitage building is renovated, increasing capacity, visibility and appeal
OTSFM operates out of the Irish American Heritage Center for 6 mos. during remodel
Elaine Moore is hired as office assistant
OTSFM celebrates 30th anniversary
Enrollment has approximately tripled since 1984?
The new music store is opened and named the Different Strummer
Jimmy Tomasello is hired to manage the Different Strummer

1988
Sandy Lucas starts teaching in the Wiggleworms program
Jimmy Tomasello begins teaching guitar at OTSFM
Paul Tyler is hired to oversee the Resource Center and Museum
*Tracy Chapman hits #1 on the pop charts, signaling a renewed interest in acoustic folk*

1989
OTSFM purchases second building at 939 Armitage for overflow
Bill Brickey begins teaching guitar at OTSFM

1990
Juan Dies does summer internship with Paul Tyler

1991
Sandy Lucas becomes Director of Children’s Program, taking over for Vicky Moss
June 29: Win Stracke dies

1993
Market research study on “ethnic opportunities and expansion” commissioned and completed
Juan Dies hired as Director of Community Outreach
Focus group study on blacks and Hispanics, by Johnson and Associates
Sandy Lucas quits as Director of Children’s Program; continues to teach
City of Chicago approaches OTSFM with the Hild Building, end of the year
Steve Levitt begins teaching at OTSFM
Dawn Greening dies.

1994
Celebration of Haitian emancipation with Boukman Eksperyans and DuSable Museum
Second major capital campaign launches

1995
Colleen Miller is hired to book concerts
Juan Dies starts La Peña
OTSFM hosts benefit concert for Bob Gibson, the year before he dies

1996
Gail Tyler is hired, marketing
Elaine Moore resigns from administration, continues to teach
Steve Levitt begins teaching Beatles Ensemble; Bryan Yanaga joins

1997
Tribute to Steve Goodman held as OTSFM benefit concert
OTSFM celebrates 40th anniversary
Major student body survey completed

1998
July: First Folk and Roots Festival held in Welles Park in Lincoln Square
September: OTSFM opens new Lincoln Square location, September, with gala concert, reunion weekend, and other events
Mark Dvorak begins teaching Spontaneous Folk Ensemble (approx date)
Ari Frede is hired as Adult Programs Manager
Arlo Leach begins taking classes at OTSFM

1999
Michael Miles resigns
Beatles Ensemble enrollment begins to mushroom, Ensemble performs memorably at Brendan Hedges Fundraiser
Colby Maddox hired to run OTSFM Resource Center
Voices of a New Black Millenium series launched
OTSFM begins participating in the Chicago World Music Festival

2000
April: Jim Hirsch resigns
Gail Tyler serves as acting executive director
First nationwide search for executive director is held
November: David Roche is hired as executive director, begins work in December
Jenna Murfin is hired

2001
TL first begins taking classes and volunteering at OTSFM
OTSFM develops new strategic plan

2002
Delano Androzzo hired as Community Program Manager
Polly Parnell moves to Chicago and begins taking classes at OTSFM

2003
AfroFolk Program begins
Arlo Leach begins teaching at OTSFM
Yolanda Androzzo hired as Youth Outreach Manager

2004
January: Mark Dvorak starts Grafton Folk Club, soon after the Grafton Pub opens
September: TL moves to Chicago for fieldwork

2005
January: Arlo Leach’s Jug Ensemble class begins
November: TL completes fieldwork

2006
David Roche leaves OTSFM for Chicago Public Schools
Eric Dell Bovi is interim director
Ari Frede leaves OTSFM
Juan Dies leaves OTSFM to pursue performance career with Sones de Mexico

2007
   Bau Graves is hired as executive director
   OTSFM celebrates 50th anniversary

2009
   Arlo Leach leaves Chicago; Hump Night Thumpers jug band continues

2010
   August: Ground is broken for OTSFM new building across the street from 4544 N. Lincoln Avenue
APPENDIX C

INDIVIDUALS

List of individuals appearing in this dissertation

Androzzo, Delano: Community Program Manager at OTSFM, 2002-2007 or 2008. African American, grew up in Chicago Heights, brother of Yolanda. Involvement in Brazilian capoeira led him to start organizing African diasporic music and dance events. Developed OTSFM’s AfroFolk series.

Androzzo, Yolanda: Youth Outreach Manager at the Old Town School, 2003-2006. In her thirties at time of interview. African American, grew up in Chicago Heights, sister of Delano. Earned degree in theatre from DePaul University, worked as an actor, then taught an Afrocentric theatre program in Chicago Public Schools before being hired at OTSFM. Later returned to theatre world, is a playwright.

Armstrong, George. Fixture of the Chicago folk music scene, both North and South Side. Known for opening events with his bagpipes, from 1950s on; edited OTSFM newsletter for its first few years. Performed and recorded with wife Gerry and two daughters. The Armstrong home was known as a gathering place for the folk music community.

Bradbury, Jan Stracke. Daughter of Win Stracke.


Broonzy, William “Big Bill.” 1893-1958. Key figure in early OTSFM stories, friend of Stracke, often treated as honorary co-founder of OTSFM in retrospect. Born to a poor black farming family in Mississippi. Learned to play fiddle and guitar as a child. Moved to Chicago in 1920 and began performing and recording as a blues musician; by the 1940s, was performing for folk revivalists as well. Joined Stracke and Terkel in touring folk music act “I Come For to Sing” from late 1940s into 1950s. Toured successfully in Europe in early 1950s as “last of the great blues singers.” Performed at OTSFM’s opening night, and on occasion thereafter. Died of throat cancer in August 1958. Profiled in Chapter 3.

Browning, Peggy. One of the original members of Dvorak’s Spontaneous Folk Ensemble. Later formed trio Pickin’ Bubs with Maura Lally and Mark Mitchell. The three played in OTSFM lobby every Tuesday evening, welcoming anyone to join. Regulars at the Grafton Folk Club. Bookkeeper and accountant, no musical training before OTSFM. Part-time house manager for OTSFM concerts in ‘05. Profiled in Chapter 8.


Cohen, Marla. Joined Beatles Ensemble after studying guitar privately; no musical training prior to adulthood. Was one of Beatles likely to take guitar solos. Taught martial arts for a living. Profiled briefly in Chapter 8.

Davis, Judy: Born ca. 1957. Student, Beatles Ensemble; also took guitar and cello classes/lessons; son took piano lessons for several years prior. Chicago native, recently became small business owner. Moved to Lincoln Square because of School in 2005. Profiled briefly in Chapter 8.

Delli Bovi, Eric: Development Director/Director of External Affairs at OTSFM, 2003-present. Had been Youth Outreach Manager before that.

Dies, Juan. Community Outreach Director, 1993-2006. Born and raised in Mexico. First hired by Paul Tyler as a summer intern while studying folklore/ethnomusicology at Indiana University (M.A., 1993). Developed OTSFM’s La Peña program and significantly increased Hispanic participation overall, other groups to a lesser extent. Co-founded Sones de Mexico ensemble in 1994 to perform son of different regions of Mexico; group was nominated for a Grammy in 2007. In 2006, Dies left OTSFM to become executive director of Sones de Mexico.


Dvorak, Mark: Born c. 1957, grew up in Cicero, Illinois, in a white, blue-collar family. Came to OTSFM in 1978 as a shy guitar student; took classes with Mike Dunbar. Then, self-taught. Decided to become guitar teacher, was hired by OTSFM in 1986. Has taught many traditionalist specialty classes and ensembles, including the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble; organizes the Grafton Folk Club. Is an active folk music performer and has recorded 6 CDs. Profiled in Chapter 8.

Epstein, Rebecca. Student in vocal classes and dance, primarily Old-Time Clogging. In her twenties; came to OTSF to meet people when she moved to Chicago from Austin with Masters in Public Policy. Found new circle of friends through clogging.


Gibson, Bob. 1931-1996. Born in NY, worked as salesman before finding his calling in folk music. Launched his career in Chicago’s Gate of Horn nightclub in the mid-1950s. Invited Frank Hamilton to move to Chicago and influenced many in the Chicago folk music scene. Became a national star of the Folk Boom, but his career deteriorated, partly because of drug abuse. Often performed at OTSF. Profiled in Chapter 3.

Greening, Dawn. Born 1920s? Died 1993. Though not on the articles of incorporation, is regarded as third founder of OTSF. Became involved in folk music through her children’s interests in mid-1950s. OTSF began as group classes she organized in her living room, taught by Hamilton. Worked as administrator and general “homemaker” at OTSF throughout 1960s. Hosted visiting folk musicians from around the country in her home. Profiled in Chapters 3 and 4.

Greening, Nate. Dawn’s husband and co-host of the many events in the Greening home. Helped with maintenance and many other tasks at OTSF in the 1960s.


Hirsch, Jim. Born 1954. Executive Director of OTSFM, 1982-2000. Grew up in the Chicago suburbs. Attended Southern Illinois University, but dropped out to pursue a guitar performance career in Chicago. Hired to teach at OTSFM in 1972, mostly at Skokie/Evanston branch, which he became director of. Hired at age 28 to replace Tate and dramatically reversed OTSFM’s fortunes with his keen business sense. Under his leadership, student body sextupled, Armitage building was remodeled and OTSFM moved into Lincoln Square building, scope of “folk music” at OTSFM was expanded, effort was made to increase racial and ethnic diversity of both music and students/audiences. Resigned in 2000. He is now Executive Director of the Chicago Sinfonietta. Profiled in Chapter 5.

Holstein, Fred. 1942-2004. Local Chicago folksinger, very active in the North Side folk music scene and involved with OTSFM. Wrote for *Come For To Sing*. Ran a folk club with his brother Ed in the 1970s.

Jenkins, Ella. Born 1924. Popular performer of children’s music, recorded extensively with Folkways Records. Involved with OTSFM in its early years, listed as a teacher for one year. Has performed there regularly ever since, as well as participating in various projects.

Johnson, Ted: Born 1928. Was the second teacher hired at OTSFM, after Frank Hamilton. Taught at least one course a year for over forty years, mostly guitar, plus a little yodeling in the 1990s. Earned Ph.D. at Northwestern University and was on the English faculty of Michigan State University until retirement. In 2005, had recently begun taking fiddle lessons at OTSFM and playing in the Spontaneous Folk Ensemble, among many other musical activities. He and his wife Marcia were instrumental in starting and sustaining the Sacred Harp singing community in Chicago. Profiled in Chapter 4.

Krane, Bjorn. Student, in his thirties, who had been taking vocal classes and guitar specialty classes off and on for four years, starting when he moved to Chicago for a medical residency. He grew up in a musical family and taught himself to play guitar as a teenager. Now a neurologist in Seattle. Profiled in Chapter 7.

Kathy Lahiff. OTSFM teacher who started the Wiggleworms program in 1985.

Lally, Maura. One of the original members of Dvorak’s Spontaneous Folk Ensemble. Later formed trio Pickin’ Bubs with Peggy Browning and Mark Mitchell. The three played in OTSFM lobby every Tuesday evening, welcoming anyone to join. Regulars at the Grafton Folk Club. Worked in a law office. Played flute as a child. Guitar teacher at OTSFM by 2010. Profiled in Chapter 8.

Landt, Dan “Skip.” Born in 1930s. Grew up in upstate New York, son of a radio pioneer and vaudeville performer. Has known about OTSFM almost since the beginning. Ph.D. in English from University of Chicago; has attended UC Folk Festival since 1961. After a divorce, began taking guitar at OTSFM in late 1970s, and harmonica in 1982. Has taught at OTSFM since he replaced his harmonica teacher in 1985. Was administrator at U of
C, then City College of Chicago until his retirement in 2003. Now very active at OTSFM and in the folk music community at large.


Lofton, Nate. Taught folk dancing at OTSFM from late 1950s into the 1970s. Frank Hamilton’s brother-in-law for a few years. African American.


Maddox, Colby. Born ca. 1966. Has taught mandolin, fiddle and guitar at OTSFM since 1996; Resource Center Manager since 1999. Grew up in California in playing lots of bluegrass and early country music in the home; played mandolin at Oberlin College (English major), taking jazz and ethnomusicology classes at the Conservatory. Toured professionally with bluegrass bands in 1990s. Friends with the author since 2000. Profiled in Chapter 6, also appears in Chapter 7.

Mann, Michael. Born ca. 1950. Runs family drapery business inherited from his father. Native Chicagolandian. Jewish, North Side. Began taking classes at OTS ca. 2001 (learned to play guitar as young man), started up w/Beatles Ens right away. Also played in Soul Ensemble and various rock ensembles.

McInnes, Jason. Began taking classes at OTSFM in 2001 a couple years after college. Dropped out of a music major in college, graduated with degree in film. Worked for Kartemquin Films as administrator, then hired at OTSFM, first at the Different Strummer, then as Human Resources Assistant; also teaches basic guitar curriculum and plays in Mariachi Ensemble. Profiled in Chapter 7.

McGuinn, Roger (Jim). Took classes at OTSFM as a teenager in the late 1950s. Credited, together with his band the Byrds, with the creation of “folk-rock.” Performs at OTSFM somewhat regularly today. Briefly profiled in Chapter 9.

American family. Studied theatre, communications and music at University of Illinois. Mostly self-taught on guitar and banjo, he published a banjo instructional book. Responsible for many of the basic structures of current educational programs. Currently active as performer, recording artist, playwright and educator in Chicago and beyond. Profiled in Chapter 5.

Miller, Colleen. Director of Concerts and Events. Born 1965; grew up in Detroit area. Moved to Chicago in the 1980s and was hired at OTSFM in 1995, after running a rock club in Rogers Park. Responsible for selecting all bookings for concert series—eclectic tastes, highly respected by peers. Profiled in Chapter 6.

Mitchell, Mark “Louie.” One of the original members of Dvorak’s Spontaneous Folk Ensemble. Later formed trio Pickin’ Bubs with Maura Lally and Peggy Browning. The three played in OTSFM lobby every Tuesday evening, welcoming anyone to join. Regulars at the Grafton Folk Club. Worked for a printing company, no musical training before OTSFM. Profiled in Chapter 8.


Moore, Peter. Guitar student for less than one year; had taken Guitar 1 and Guitar 2. Self-taught on keyboards and as a painter, with mixed success. A native of Dublin, Ireland; immigrated to Chicago in early 1990s. Never went to college; worked in tech support and development. Born 1966, and father of two small children in the Wiggleworms program. Profiled in Chapter 7.


a central organizer; met her husband through the Beatles. Also instrumental in starting a
community orchestra nearby. Is executive director of Chicago Arts Partnerships in
Education. Profiled in Chapters 7 and 8.

Roche, David. Born 1946, Chappaqua, NY. Executive Director of OTSFM, 2001-2006. Ph.D.
in ethnomusicology, University of California-Berkeley (research on Indian tribal music);
MA in ethno, Wesleyan University. Also earned MA in Music Ed./Kodaly method.
Wanted to be sitar performer, lived in India. Worked in folk arts administration for 15
years in California, Bay Area. Left OTSFM to become Head of Arts Education for
Chicago Public Schools; as of 2010, is executive director of Blue Bear School of Music

Rotondo, Cindy. Born ca. 1955. Guitar student. Had attended concerts at OTSFM since 1980s;
started guitar classes ca. 2001, advancing at slow pace, no serious performing goals.
Employed as campus recruiter for consulting firm. Profiled in Chapter 7.

Ryan, Tom. Long-time member of the Beatles Ensemble. Formed Acoustic Humans trio with
fellow Beatles Jenny Peel and Bryan Yanaga. Guitar teacher as of 2010.

Sayre, Janet. OTSFM Development Associate. Student since 1995. Member of Old Time
Ensemble, then Beatles Ensemble. Says OTSFM “saved her life” after tragic loss of her

Shriver, Ellen. Grew up on a farm in IL, played in a jug band in high school and college. Began
taking classes at OTSFM when husband retired. Both joined Jug Band/Hump Night

Soltker, Gertrude. One of the three official founders of OTSFM, took care of administrative
details and bookkeeping. Left in the early 1960s. An old friend of Stracke and Terkel;
all had been in the Chicago Repertory Group in the 1930s together.

Stracke, Win. 1908-1991. OTSFM co-founder. Born in Kansas to immigrant German parents,
grew up in Chicago (Old Town and Andersonville). Son of a minister. Gifted baritone
singer, classically trained. Was active in Chicago theatre, esp. labor theatre, in the 1930s.
Served in the infantry in World War II. Headed the Chicago chapter of People’s Songs
and sat on the national board. Became TV actor in 1950s; his “Animal Playtime” show
for children was broadcast nationally on NBC. Also a local radio personality. One of
only 2 blacklisted entertainers in Chicago, with Terkel. Started OTSFM in 1957 after
taking classes from Frank Hamilton. Recorded several albums, usually with historical or
regional significance. Retired from OTSFM in 1969 and moved to Mexico, then

Strom, Sue. First took a guitar class at OTSFM in early 1970s, then stopped. Returned 30 years
later for guitar and fiddle, part of Spontaneous Folk Ensemble clan. Had always been a
singer and lover of folk music. By 2005, was performing with Hard Cryin’ Tour, a
country quartet of OTSFM teachers and former students.
Tate, Ray. Born in late 1930s or early 1940s, Kentucky. Avid guitarist from childhood, was introduced to folk music scene after moving to Chicago as an adult in early 1960s. Began teaching at OTSFM and replaced Frank Hamilton as Dean of Faculty in 1962, and Win Stracke as executive director in 1969. Maintained career in commercial recording business concurrently. Left OTSF in 1982, moved to Texas. Profiled in Chapter 4.

Terkel, Studs. 1912-2008. Writer, historian, journalist, actor, broadcaster, always closely identified with Chicago. Close friend of Win Stracke since the two met in the 1930s through labor theatre. Collaborated on Stud’s Place television program in early 1950s. One of only two Chicago entertainers to be blacklisted, with Stracke. Long-time supporter of OTSFM; often served as MC for special events.

Todd, Alex. Beginning mandolin student. Was inspired to learn to play his grandfather’s mandolin—grandfather was a famous circus trapeze artist. Roughly 40? Worked as a reference librarian. Profiled briefly in Chapter 7.


Toon, Rebecca. Guitar teacher, started at OTSF at front desk. In her late twenties/early thirties. Also helped with video in the Resource Center.

Tyler, Gail. First began taking classes at OTSF in early 1990s—fiddle and Old Time Ensemble initially. With a strong business background (MBA and 15 years in the corporate world), she was hired as Marketing Director in 1996. Has also served as Operations Director and Interim Executive Director of OTSFM. Has been instrumental in developing OTSFM’s internal market research and securing grants, as well as myriad other operational functions of the School. Married to Paul Tyler. Profiled in Chapter 5.


Yanaga, Bryan. Student and member of Beatles Ensemble since 1996. Also a member of BE splinter group the Acoustic Humans. A physician and lifelong Chicagoan. Profiled in Chapter 8.
AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Tanya Su-kyung Lee grew up in the Pacific Northwest. She earned a B.A. in East Asian Studies with High Honors from Oberlin College and a B.Music in Music History with a minor in Piano Performance from Oberlin Conservatory, both in 1994. From 1994 to 1996, she taught English at Yunnan University in Kunming, China, on an Oberlin Shansi Fellowship. She has also taught in Seoul, South Korea; Taipei, Taiwan; and Seattle, Washington. She holds a M.A. in ethnomusicology from the University of Washington, Seattle. From 2006 through 2009, she served as Program Director of the Asian Educational Media Service at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She currently lives in Durham, North Carolina.