From coal mine to sound stage: The story of Win Stracke

When he was just out of high school in 1926, Win Stracke, son of a German Baptist preacher, drove a Model T Ford to Thermopolis, Wyoming. He landed a job as a roughneck, digging coal with a man called Flat Wheel Harry - "the first person who really gave me the feeling of the oral tradition of American folk music," Win said.

"After working at the coal mine, I'd tell a fellow about stories of Babe the Blue Ox, and he taught me to sing 'The Big Rock Candy Mountain.'"

Thermopolis Win developed his sense of social justice, and gave his first non-church performance at a workers' club. But his first professional break came back in Chicago in 1931, when WLS hired him as a bass singer. He appeared with the Cumberland Ridge Runners and Smoky Mountain Singers.

"It was my first introduction to genuine, indigenous American folk music, and I liked it," Win told the Chicago Daily News in 1971. "There was magic in it."

Meeting Studs Terkel

In 1938 Win approached a young actor in the political Chicago Repertory Group with an idea to use music as a labor organizing tool.

"Win was a tremendous asset to the group, musically and politically," recalls Studs Terkel. "Win looked like a banker, but he always defended the underdog. For example, he and I were walking in the early days, and we saw a cop beating a very frail black guy against the wall. This was back in 1950. Win stops and says to the cop, 'What's going on?' The cop says, 'Well, Sir, just doing my duty.' Ste. 'Yeah, well what are you doing that for? What else do you want, Sir?' The cop says, 'I just want to see you just don't hurt this man unnecessarily.' Then I look at the man and I say, 'Yeah! The cop turns to me and says, 'What do you want? Win it was different. His appearance conveyed an instant respectability.'"

Win's Chicago's airwaves

World War II interrupted Win's musical career as he went off to serve in Europe and North Africa. Upon returning, Win hooked up with Studs again, becoming a regular on "Studs' Place" on WLS and joining with Studs, Bill Browzy, and Lawrence Lane in "I Come for to Sing," a touring folk review.

In 1953, Win was given a program of his own: the city's most popular children's show, "Animal Playtime," on WBCN. He also appeared on "The Dave Garroway Show" and others, entertaining audiences with his rich bass voice and extensive repertoire.

When Win decided to improve his guitar playing in 1957, his new friend Dawn Greening suggested he study with Frank Hamilton - and the Old Town School was born.

After the school was founded, Win continued an enviable performing and recording career. He wrote a number of songs about local and American history, including with Norman Luboff the Illinois cantata "Freedom Country" for the 1968 Illinois sesquicentennial. But what gave him most pride, he said, was "the thousands of people who have come through the school and learned to love and perform this music."

Win Stracke pikes with Leslie Greening, Katherine Anderson, and Tawn at the front desk.

Folksinging community

If you were to start listing the singers and folk singers who have performed at the school without compensation - names like Pete Seeger, Odetta, Studs Terkel, Doc Watson, Mahalia Jackson, Bill Monroe, the Weavers, Joan Baez - it would take a long time to reach the end of the list.

A word about our teachers. Many of them learned their skills here and stayed on to become part of the teaching staff. Many more were fine performers who wanted to become part of the school. All of them have been dedicated, loyal, and enthusiastic. The school and they have grown together.

Many thousands of students by now have attended classes. And while the school has always insisted that its main purpose was to give performing skills to amateurs - in the best sense of that word - some of these students became performers: people like Steve Goodman, John Prine, Jim McGuinn, Ginni Clemmons, Valucha, and Fred and Ed Heilweil.

When we opened our doors on December 1, 1957, we described ourselves, in what now seems a burst of overconfidence, as America's first permanent school for the study of folk music and folk instruments. Somehow, we have tapped the strength, the beauty, the longevity of the songs we sing, and channelled these qualities into a gathering place we call the Old Town School of Folk Music. We have built an institution that commands nationwide respect. It seems the hunch was right!

(Win Stracke died of a stroke in 1991. The School set up a scholarship fund in honor of his efforts to expose people from all social backgrounds to the joys of folk music.)