Opening night

The space at 333 West North Avenue was ready. The press releases were mailed, the announcements made. And on December 1, 1957, the doors opened. Frank Hamilton describes the first night of Old Town School of Folk Music.

“Our grand opening on December 1, 1957, was Broadway-super-bat-show opening night, although I might be exaggerating a little. A few skeptics huddled in corners shaking their heads. George Armstrong piped us in with full Scottish regalia; an Old Town School tradition was started.

“That night Big Bill Broonzy gave us a demo of his powerful guitar playing. Big Bill, black and handsome, could stir a roomful of uptight humans into a bowl of instant throbbing rhythmic jelly.

“The audience sang and melted the cracked plaster away; the cobwebs vanished and the roaches scrambled. The folk genie popped the cork on the bottle and great music ran over the room.”

Now it’s the evening of the first of December, 1957, and it’s all coming together. Win’s folk dream, materializing here in this curious old building on North Avenue – up the long stairway, down the corridor past the dusty Proletarian Party offices, into that big room, the comforting blare of bagpipes (George Armstrong), and on the walls all those neat little posters with the folk strums, and here’s Dawn Greening, her big smile and her coffee cake (or was it champagne that night?) and all these interesting people milling about – 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-out, the assorted Chi-town and 43rd Ward characters that Win knows – everybody from Studs Terkel to Paddy Bauler.

“Do we know that history is being hatched here? What we know is that Win and Frank and Dawn and Gert have somehow put a school together around this strange new idea, this cool way of startling amateurs into making music now – from note one – using neat traditional techniques, user-friendly notation, a relaxed class setting.”

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Ted Johnson
(Ted is the only current Old Town School teacher who has remained in the faculty since 1957.)