Life at the Old Town School

What would bring students back in the 1980’s? First, the School had to win back faculty members Jim hired program director and professional banjo player Michael Miles in 1984, who did just that, and reached out to old and new students. During the 1980’s and into the 90’s, the School helped shape trends in the acoustic music scene and listened to student requests. So not only was tuition kept as low as possible, but new instruments and genres were added, from African drumming to sea chantey singing. Professional musicians like world-champion Irish fiddler Liz Carroll and vocalists Robin and Linda Williams still give workshops. As before, students can take private lessons. The Old Town Chorus now under the exuberant direction of Margaret Belli was revived. And the children’s program, in response to the increasing number of strollers seen in the neighborhood, took on a life of its own; the stomping feet and clapping hands of the three-foot-giggling dervishes known as the Wiggles, fill the School during daytime hours.

If Win Stracke could walk the halls of 909 W. Armitage today, he’d find another of the early School traditions still going strong. As before, classes come together at the end of the evening for the “second half” to learn a few songs from the School’s tunebook and practice playing and singing in a group. And just as Frank Hamilton and Ray Tate encouraged students to try out their growing skills on friendly, nonthreatening audiences, so today’s teachers gently nudge new musicians on stage. Every Friday night, students can share folk tunes in a song circle in the lobby, then pack up their guitars and stroll into Bers Hall’s performing space for Mr. Coffeehouse, the School’s own folk club. Anyone can sit in the audience—or sign up to perform a two- or three-song set. “Mr. Coffeehouse lets students of all levels can get together with staff instructors and local or touring musicians to create an evening of music in the Old Town School tradition,” says coffeehouse coordinator Mark Dovansk.