Students also perform in special School concerts and parties held at the end of each eight-week session; even a doo-wop class have been known to regale restaurant patrons next door with impromptu versions of "Sea of Love" or "Chain Gang" after class. Even the Christmas posada is back, although transformed: Intrepid carolers stroll through the neighborhood, ringer doorbells or stopping in taverns to perform enthusiastic, sometimes raucous, versions of old tunes. And both teachers and students give free performances at hospitals, nursing homes, and homeless shelters as part of the School's continuing program to bring folk music to the city of Chicago.

The Old Town School, live, on the air

From 1983 to 1986, the School extended its reach to the entire nation via "The Flea Market," a live program syndicated to over 100 public radio stations.

was program director of [WBEZ-FM] at the time and we knew we wanted to do something live," says Ken Davis. "It just so happens that I met Jim Hirsch around that time and we talked about doing a show together — and so we did."

And so "The Flea Market" hit the airwaves, starting in June 1983. "Welcome to the Flea Market, coming to you from the 'wooded campus' of the Old Town School of Folk Music," co-host Larry Rand intoned at the beginning of the broadcast. The first program featured Buck's Store and Range Company, Becky Armstrong, Larry, and fellow host Art Thieme. Larry and Art took turns hosting the show; WBEZ producer Ken Gagne selected the performers, with Jim Hirsch as artistic consultant. Ken Davis handled administration. Jim Post took over as host in late 1985.

Big-time musicians playing in the School's performance series would often be persuaded to do a set on the Flea Market, and so the soda-and-beer-drinking crowd in Broony Hall and countless radio listeners got to hear an incredible range of music, from the Andean group Sibia to John Hartford to the satirical Uncle Bonsai.

"I think one of my favorite shows was Queen Ida [and the Bon Temps Zydeco Band]." Larry Rand says, remembering Queen Ida's exuberant performance that left the crowd smiling and tapping their feet on the shaky floors of WBEZ's White Plains, New York. We weren't sure how Queen Ida would take it, but she loved it! And the band just tore the place up...it was one of the magical moments on the show."

Starting in 1984, WBEZ syndicated The Flea Market nationally, soon reaching over 100 public radio stations across the country.

"[A Prairie Home Companion] was hot — radioactive — at the time, using a lot of folk, so NPR stations were hungry for folk musicians," Larry explains. Ken adds, "We started doing this program right about the time that WBEZ was starting to be recognized. I think it was very instrumental in helping to get the station known because there were then, and there are now, a lot of folk music fans in Chicago and they were very supportive."

There were some conflicts — the snappy, quick-change acts requested by the show's producer didn't always sit well with the hosts or some of the performers. Eventually the show moved to Navy Pier, which the city allowed WBEZ to use free of charge. Still, the Flea Market did help the Old Town School regain local and national recognition as the reigning place for folk music in Chicago.