Serving the folk music community

By 1990, an incredible 1,500 students were passing through the renovated doors of the School each week. And the Old Town School has become more than just their classroom site. Since the 1987 renovation, the School has operated a music store and a resource center with a remarkably rich archive of recorded music—so students and the public can drop in to learn how to restring a banjo or hear a sample of Leadbelly’s guitar playing.

The Different Strummer

The School opened its own music store, the Different Strummer, after the school’s 1987 renovation. The store offers students and other musicians repair tips, a wide selection of instruments, and hard-to-find recordings. Tom Conway, the store’s current manager, started working there in 1990. “One of the major pluses of working here is that there are many musicians who come in here and do any music mini-concert,” says Tom, a singer and guitarist himself. “A 90-year-old man came in a few weeks ago and played the fiddle like nobody’s business.”

All are welcome to attend the store’s workshops on guitar and banjo care, whether they’re playing a heirloom or an old clunker held together with duct tape. As Tom puts it, “We’re striving to provide a high level of service for everyone.”

The Resource Center

Old photographs of the School often feature the large, handsome glass-doored bookcase that holds Win Stracke’s book collection and folk music magazines. Before the renovation, that was the extent of the Old Town School’s library.

Jim’s vision was always that the School would give the most complete folk music experience available to people, and part of that was to give them a chance to look through all the resources that were available on various recordings,” explains Paul Tyler, curator of the School’s resource center. The Dr. Scholl Foundation donated funds for the creation of the center, and has continued its support. Paul, who holds a Ph.D. in folklore and ethnology, was hired in April 1987.

Until the spring of 1990, the School also produced exhibits “having to do with folk music and folk culture that would interest and teach people about the folk world,” as Paul says, remembering displays on Mexican festivals, the history of the five-string banjo, and Guatemalan folk art. But the resource center, with its burgeoning collection of recordings, needed more room, so the School decided to sponsor exhibits outside its walls. “I would guess that there must have been 1,000 pieces in the collection [before the 1987 renovation] and now we’re up to 15,000,” Paul estimates. He seeks out new recordings and books, often based on viewer requests.

Anybody can stop by the resource center to say, hear a recording of Steve Goodman, read about African-American roots of the blues, or watch videotapes of School concerts. Many of the center’s books and recordings are rare, even out of print. Incidentally, the School hasn’t left the museum business entirely: it’s serving as curator for an exhibit on Native American folk art to be presented at the Uptown Hull House in fall 1992 as part of the School’s mission to bring folk culture to the citizens of Chicago.

Recognition for the Old Town School

People in the arts community and the neighborhood started to notice by the mid-1980s that the School was coming out of its brief slump. Since the School was suddenly buzzing with activity, it was hard not to notice. Newspaper features no longer opened with rumors of the School’s imminent demise but instead carried headlines like “Folk lives!”

Teachers, staff, and friends were gratified that the city had taken notice of the School’s renaissance, and the media attention was flattering. But in April 1987, “one of the staff and board’s proudest moments occurred,” according to Jim Hirsch. The Beatrice Foundation presented an Award of Excellence on the School—an honor given to only three nonprofit organizations out of 190 applicants. The Foundation cited the School’s teaching, concerts, and community service programs, which highlight the city’s diverse ethnic and racial heritage.

“After years of very hard work,” Jim says, “the staff and the board felt that their efforts had been recognized in a significant way.”