

Chris Vallillo takes a musical journey to the people and places of the Illinois 'nation' of Forgottonia

By Rick Kogan

June 01, 2023



Chris Vallillo's latest album is "Forgottonia," named after a real place, of sorts, in Western Illinois. (Tim Schroll)

Chris Vallillo, an accomplished songwriter and singer, did not start out wanting to be a songwriter and singer but rather was drawn to archaeology and that has given him the ability to bring the past to vivid life in song.

"Folk music is not a static thing at all," he says. "It is a living, breathing thing. It is music that evolves, reflecting everyday people's lives, concerns, struggles.

Vallillo was born in Hammond, Indiana, and moved around a lot as a kid because his father was a civil engineer. He had three brothers, and the family was living in New Castle, Pennsylvania, when his parents finally relented and bought him a used guitar.

He taught himself to play but never took it seriously until attending college. "I had roommates who were very good and I had to step it up," he says. "I got good enough so that I could sorta-kinda play in bands, mostly rock 'n' roll then."

By the time he had received a degree in archeology from Beloit College he realized, "I did not want to pursue a Ph.D. That would have enabled me to stay in classrooms, teaching others and that was not for me. I enjoyed the field work and I was becoming more and more passionate about music, about the stories that people told in songs. I wanted to combine those passions."

There is no way to overestimate how influential an archaeological field trip he took in 1976 was, in large part because, he says, "That's when I discovered Forgottonia."

Forgottonia is an "independent nation" created in the late 1960s by a group of creative and politically-savvy private citizens, business folks and others who lived in 16 Western Illinois counties (Fulton, Calhoun, Pike

and Mercer among them). It was born out of frustration due to the lack of state and federal government support for regional transportation and infrastructure projects.

“It was great political theater,” says Vallillo. “The plan was to secede from the country, declare war on the United States, immediately surrender and apply for foreign aid.”

This made national news. The Tribune chimed in, stating in a 1974 editorial, “We sympathize with the proposed state of Forgottonia ... ignored by state and federal government ... Others of us, too, have come from just such unremembered areas — hometowns eternal doomed to be snubbed and forgotten.”

Astonishingly, it worked. Money and projects began to pour into the area. Vallillo came too. “I arrived in 1976 to do archaeological research,” he says. “It was like stepping back 40 years in time, visiting these small farming communities, talking to people in diners, and hearing their music. I began to realize that there is a story behind every song, stories of what the music meant to the people who created it.”

He was so inspired by that trip that, shortly after getting his Bachelor of Arts from Beloit, he decided to devote his career and life fully to music. It has been quite a ride.

He got really good on the guitar, with Folk Wax Magazine editor Arthur Wood saying, “Vallillo’s guitar playing flows like warm honey and is a true aural delight.”

I’ll direct your attention to “Abraham Lincoln in Song,” a 2007 album that is such a fine gathering of tunes that it was endorsed by the Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, and 2015’s “Oh Freedom! Songs of the Civil Rights Movement,” a stirring gathering of which he says, “Songs filled the movement. They bred inspiration, courage and solidarity in the face of the ever-present threat of violence. Freedom songs would be the glue that held the movement together.”

Vallillo’s latest, released for radio in May, is fittingly titled “Forgottonia,” and it is a 12-tune marvel that captures stories of people and place and transports listeners to vibrant bygone times. He has worked on some of these songs for more than 30 years and he uses the songwriting and playing talents of such esteemed colleagues as Don Stiernberg and Will L. Thompson, who wrote the CD’s “Softly and Tenderly” in 1880.

It has already gathered praise. Marilyn Rea Beyer, who hosts the venerable “The Midnight Special” on WFMT-FM 98.7, calls it “a memorable set of sprightly tunes and songs rich in imagery and idiosyncratic characters.”

No kidding. I am especially taken with such characters as Carl Shelton, the leader of a gang that controlled gambling, bootlegging and other nefarious activities downstate, and such moonshiners as future race car driver Junior Johnson.

One of the most exciting songs is the title track. “Forgottonia” is a song Vallillo started more than 30 years ago and recently rediscovered in a drawer in his house.

“I rewrote the melody and added the last verse,” he says.

He did that in the house he has shared for many decades with his wife, Dorie, a former NPR radio station manager. They have a daughter, Maggie Mei, soon to be a senior in college in Chicago.

Vallillo has recently received a grant to bring “Forgottonia” to the stage. An enthusiastic collaborator, he has done so effectively and artfully before with “Abraham Lincoln in Song” and “Oh Freedom!” He expects “Forgottonia” to make it to the stage sometime next year.

“It’s nice to have the time to develop such a show,” he says.

Though it’s a four hour drive from Macomb to Chicago, he would like to see this new show find a home here in 2024. In the meantime, he can always visit a new addition to the Macomb scene: the Forgottonia Brewery opened there in 2019. He should feel right at home.

rkogan@chicagotribune.com