



Chris Vallillo

Sonic Archeologist Follows the Musical Footsteps of Abraham Lincoln

by Dan Willging

He was a consummate politician who sought harmony among disparate party factions by anointing them to his cabinet. His political influence was enhanced by superior oratory skills, while his classical speeches were short but effectively appealed to the nation. He's best known for abolishing slavery and penning the Proclamation of Emancipation. When he took the oath of the highest office that this nation has to offer on March 4, 1861, seven Southern states had already seceded. Eventually he reunited the country, but not without the experience of a bloody Civil War. In the end, Abraham Lincoln paid for this monumental success

with his life, thanks to the cowardly bullet fired from the gun of assassin John Wilkes Booth on April 14, 1865.

This year marks the beginning of a special two-year celebration of one of the world's most beloved leaders -- the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth on February 12, 1809. While some activities kick off in 2008, the majority are expected to take place in 2009, especially in Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky, three states that all lay claim to Lincoln. Additionally, 2008 commemorates the 150th anniversary of the great Lincoln-Douglas debates that occurred in various towns in Illinois.

Perhaps one of the most unusual perspectives will be the sonic tribute prepared by singer/songwriter Chris Vallillo of Macomb, Illinois. For the past 20 years and counting, the man dubbed "Prairie Poet" has done what few musicians have ever done: combine fact-finding research skills as a trained anthropologist with a fascinating musical acumen to present topical, historically based programs.

No stranger to developing and presenting such endeavors, Vallillo's ethnomusical projects have found him on various expeditions along the Mississippi River and the Illinois River Valley collecting songs and stories of the rural Midwest. Much of the material Vallillo now presents came from a field research project he did in the 1980's for the Illinois Arts Council. Essentially he played the role of a modern day, small scaled Alan Lomax: He interviewed, documented and recorded the generation of rural people born before radio and television.

"I was locating and interviewing the oldest people still alive in rural west central Illinois, talking with them about how music had been a part of their lives, what kind of music they do, and what they remembered." In some cases, the subjects would play for him as they were able, thus allowing Vallillo to record one of their final performances. Ultimately the master tapes, photographs, field journals, and other supporting documentation ended up in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. In addition, a copy of the master tapes is deposited in the archives of Western Illinois University. Vallillo notes that the experience was a turning point career-wise, and the foundation of what would come later.

A few years ago, Vallillo came up with the idea of doing a program on Abraham Lincoln by examining his life through music. As part of the Road Scholars Program of the Illinois Humanities Council, a

