

Oh Freedom!

SONGS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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Celebration through song

Event honors Black History Month, Civil Rights Movement

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A unique celebration of Black History Month and the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement was offered at the Tinley Park Public Library Wednesday, Feb. 25, when folk song artist, Chris Vallillo presented "Oh Freedom," a compilation of songs and stories evolving from the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s.

"The Freedom Movement was a truly heroic period of time, and in my opinion, it is one of the greatest achievements of our country," Vallillo told his audience of approximately 35. "I love singing these historical songs because they are a window to our past and speak of the bravery and heroism of so many."

He explained many of the Freedom songs were derived from The Highlander Folk School Book which became the "Bible" of the Civil Rights music. The Highlander Folk School is a social justice leadership training school and cultural center located in New Market, Tennessee. It played a critical role in the American Civil Rights movement and was featured in a 1985 Documentary "You Gotta Move."

Vallillo said he became more aware of the Civil Rights Movement through an old folk song titled "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd." The song was a road map for slaves hoping to escape through the Underground

Railroad.

His performance included a background story with each song and a request for the audience to join him in singing. He began with his favorite song "Hallelujah, I'm Travelin'." The song was sung by the Freedom Riders who gathered from all over the country in 1962 to board the busses which became known as the Freedom Busses. Vallillo remarked that when they met resistance, danger and harassment, they continued to sing. He commented that throughout the years of the Civil Rights Movement, the demonstrators continued to sing. They sang as they marched, as they were arrested and as they sat in jail.

Some audience members were moved to tears when Vallillo sang "Birmingham Sunday," a song about the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in September, 1963 where four young girls lost their lives. The touching lyrics include a line repeated at the end of each verse, "and the choir kept singing of freedom..."

Vallillo played the songs on a combination of vintage and modern instruments. They included a 1936 Wood Bodied Dobro, a 1920 Gibson A Mandolin, a 1956 Gibson ES225, a modern Collings Guitar and a National Tricone guitar. The majority of the music was performed bottleneck slide style, a style of guitar playing that evolved from an old slave instrument called "the Didley Stick." The performance was greeted with much applause.

Bob Nichols, a 30-year Tinley Park resident, spoke



Musician Chris Vallillo performs Wednesday, Feb. 25, at the Tinley Park Public Library during his "Oh Freedom" show about the Civil Rights Movement. PHOTOS BY TRISTAN ZEIER/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

highly of the event.

"It was excellent," he said. "Getting the audience to participate the way he did, was a good thing. It really represented what the freedom movement was all about... bringing people together."

Angela Falls, who attended with her husband, Terrence, also enjoyed the event.

"It was uplifting and was truly reflective of this time in history that was so important in America," she said.

Sue Bailey, the Marketing and Community Outreach Specialist for the Tinley Park Public Library, said she heard positive comments from patrons leaving the performance.

"Overall, they seemed to feel it was a moving way to learn of the events of the Civil Rights Movement," Bailey said.



JoAnn Henderson (left) claps after Chris Vallillo finishes a song.