THE TROUBADOUR *Experience*

by mark dvorak

And so we return to the subject of performing. A great teacher, William Allaudin Mathieu lives in Sebastopol, California, and in his collection of essays, *The Listening Book,* he remarks, "...the impulse to play music with friends grows like a vine stretching over a wall. It grows into the desire to play for everyone..."

Once, at the urging of a band of students, I somewhat reluctantly offered a class called *The Troubadour Experience*. The students were interested in learning more about performing, and they thought I might be able to offer up some pointers. A few of the folks were curious about microphones and sound systems and such, and others wanted to know how one goes about getting themselves booked into a venue.

But I didn't want to spend time on career strategy or the machinations of the music business. I wanted to direct the focus of the class away from cleverness or scheming, and away from the hoopla of drawing attention to oneself. Through example, direction, and trial and error, I wanted each member of the class to discover for themselves, some of what goes into creating an authentic and potent musical moment. And I wanted them to consider how that moment might be offered up as a gift, to be relished by a listening audience.

The Troubadour is an essential figure in Western music. In the middle ages, *amour* - a French word for love - was celebrated by wandering poets and minstrels who sang of "what the eyes have made welcome to the heart."

Later, *guitarra* music was heard throughout Spain, as was a kind of deep singing called *cante jondo*. And on our side of the ocean, the *corrido* became the national song form of Mexican ballad singers.

The troubadour appeared again when a fellow named Woodrow Wilson Guthrie roamed and rambled, and followed his footsteps down the ribbon of the American highway. And later still Robert Zimmerman, a young folk singer and songwriter from Minnesota changed his name, moved to New York, and touched the minds and hearts of a generation confronted with social unrest and unjustified war.

And to a class room in Chicago came the troubadour once more. One by one they stood each Tuesday evening before their peers, instrument in hand, with an appetite for adventure and affirmation. Most were men; some were older, some younger.

For almost a year and a half, I watched and listened. I took pages of notes each week, and commented and coached and suggested. I wanted to remain helpful, but mostly out of the way. Every now and again a quick compliment seemed appropriate and instructive, but the performances were by and large incomplete, and very complex. Facilitating such a class required a level of attention and care that proved challenging. And in the end, I learned a whole lot about the very subject I was already supposed to be somewhat expert in.

Performing is largely a learn-as-you-go business, and each brings to a performance what is uniquely theirs to give. No single set of instructions could ever prepare anyone for the many circumstances a performer will face. A certain desire to be in front of people is required, as is an active devotion to craft. Ironing out all the details related to presenting yourself and your songs in public, takes time and patience. It involves practice and reflection, and no small amount of failure. In performing, every grandiose artistic vision must first come to life in the terms of common sense and common courtesy.

After several hundred class room performances by dozens of participants, the following four precepts were derived from our collective experience and discussion:

1) Know your stuff. A song is performance-worthy only after you know the words and the arrangement cold. It is impolite to ask people to watch and listen while you stumble around underprepared.

2) Keep still. It is natural to tap your foot or move in other ways to the rhythm as you play. Consider though, the bodily movements you make while playing and singing use energy and undermine your ability to focus. Posture is important for singers, and still more difficult to maintain for those who are self-accompanied. Stillness offers the best chance to relax, and concentrate on what you have come to do. Stillness is the place from which to begin, and stillness is the place to return when feeling unsettled or distracted.

3) Avoid eye contact. Stand or sit, but hold your head up and keep your eyes forward as you sing. Scan the tops of the heads of your audience, or pick something out on the back wall to focus on. At first, it is important to avoid making eye contact with audience members. A considerate performer allows the audience to look *him* over first, to size *him* up first, and get comfortable in their listening. Making eye contact at a meeting, or in a social situation is a way to initiate a proposal, or a confrontation. Performing honors a different protocol.

4) Don't talk. Give your music a chance to do its work. After you have been introduced, don't talk. Play and sing. When your first song is finished, don't talk. Begin the next song as the applause dwindles. If you are out of tune, don't talk. Tune your instrument and continue. An inner dialogue is running through our minds pretty much all the time. Under pressure we tend to verbalize these random thoughts, and they only serve to distract you, the performer, and your listeners. Your audience won't mind if you don't explain anything while fixing your capo, retuning your strings, or searching through your pockets for the right pick.

In the end, what your heart has been called to express has to somehow squeeze through the filters of time, sound and language; all rehearsed and purposeful and musical. Over time, the delicate relationship between listener and performer settles to a place where soul giving and receiving become unforced and natural.

Over time, invitations appear, calendar dates are filled in, and money changes hands. Your performing, and your preparing to perform, become a kind of work. You return to the table again to practice and polish. You make choices about clothing and hair, and whether to wear your glasses or not. You get in the car again to bounce down the highway to some place where strangers and friends alike are waiting for your music to happen.

And over time it begins to matter less from where the music comes, and to where it is ultimately going. You tune up, you sit down, you get comfortable, and begin. The words are there and your hands are sure on the strings, as if this was what they were always meant to be doing. The moments unfold and you respond musically, with something that is authentically yours to give. The listening deepens. The wall between performer and audience finally crumbles. Music flows.