

A community, a life in music

How folk singer
Mark Dvorak
found his way in his
latest book
'31 Winters'



Rick Kogan

He is a folk singer, Mark Dvorak is. He has been since his teenage years when, growing up in a Cicero house with three brothers (two older, one younger), their parents and grandparents nearby, he read Anthony Scaduto's 1971 book "Bob Dylan: An Intimate Biography."

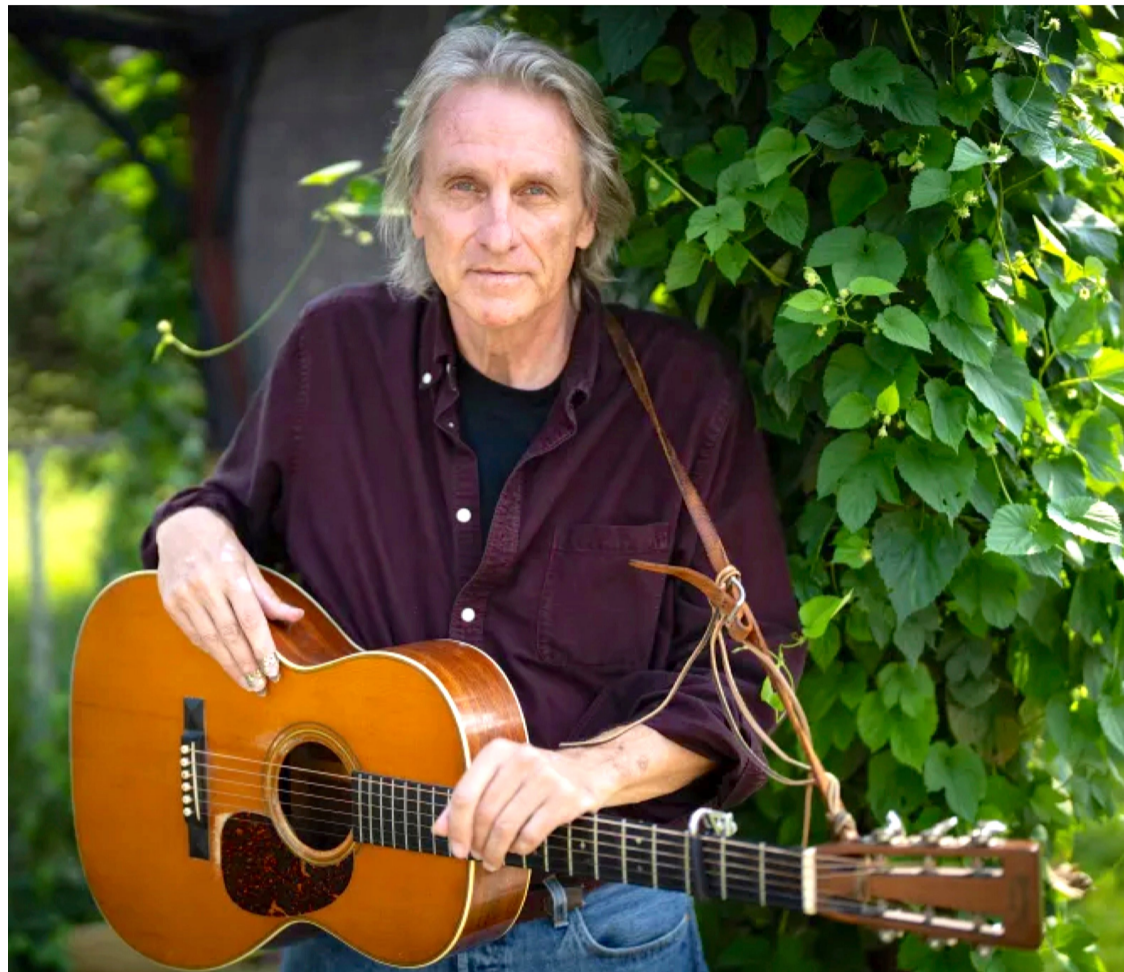
In its pages, he met not only the compelling title character, but such other colorful giants as Pete Seeger, Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie. He also discovered, though he didn't realize it at the time, a way of life that has been filled with rewards beyond riches and fame.

It started with that book and, oh yes, there was soon a guitar involved.

"I was the last of my brothers to get a guitar and I used the money I was making working at a xylophone factory to buy one for \$40," he says.

His father worked for a chemical company and his mom was, with four active boys to care for, more than a mom.

"Oh, she worked very hard," he says, a smile crossing his face. "It took her a lot of work just getting us all through high school." He and his brothers and many neighborhood pals were all creatively inclined, one brother forming a band that played such clubs as the Kingston Mines.



Longtime folk musician / writer Mark Dvorak. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS / CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Dvorak and a friend spent a summer riding their motorcycles around the country and when he returned home, he walked into the Old Town School of Folk Music.

"I didn't really have any thought of being able to make a living with music. I just wanted to learn how to play better but the minute I walked into the school it felt so right," he says. "What I found was a community, a life."

His job unloading trucks and stocking shelves at a Jewel grocery store was paying the bills then. He worked the night shift and during the days began offering lessons at his apartment. "I didn't charge anything," he says. "It was sort of a leave anything you can arrangement. I did not have a lot of self-confidence in those years and didn't want to feel the pressure."

He began teaching formally when hired at the Old Town School in 1986

by the great banjo artist, teacher and composer Michael Miles, one of many that Dvorak admires, as I do. He has tender memories and words for Win Stracke, the co-founder of the Old Town School and one of the city's most influential if largely forgotten artists. Though Dvorak did not meet Stracke until he was aged and living in a retirement home in Evanston, he became a friend and writes that he feels, walking around the Old Town School today, that it "is difficult to imagine you are someplace other than inside Win Stracke's dream."

He has equal fondness for such people as Art Thieme, Fred Holstein and Michael Smith, who asked Dvorak to join Smith's wife Barbara Barrow, and Tom Dundee, to form a recreation of the 1950s folk group the Weavers with "Weavermania!" an immensely popular group for a time.

Dvorak's latest book has a lively, intimate chapter devoted to the formation of that group. The book has so much of his life with all sorts of stories filling the 350-some pages of his "31 Winters: Finding the Folk Way."

"As it was for many musicians, the pandemic gave me a lot of time," he says. "I used it to go back into my notes and notebooks to see what was in there, and what I might be able to come up with."

He found many things and added some new writing to compile what is a delightfully personal book. It is part memoir, part philosophical treatise and part instructional manual, as in the chapter devoted to "notes on teaching." 55 notes such as, "If you aren't the most talented of knowledgeable, be the funniest" and "You aren't training dogs for show here. You are helping people to become more complete human beings. You are helping

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— Mark Dvorak talking about the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago

students to become themselves."

Dvorak is a few years too young to have been part of the Steve Goodman-Bonnie Koloc-John Prine crowd that sparked and sparkled during folk's golden age here, but for decades now he has been an important, popular and influential part of that scene.

Though he has written and recorded many songs, he has never been drawn to the commercial side of the music biz. "By the time I started recording, LPs were out," he says. "I concentrated on community music projects and live performances."

He has a new album, "Mark Dvorak: Live & Alone." It is his 21st.

"Or maybe the 20th," he says.

He is a folk singer, Mark Dvorak is, and that's just fine. He has won awards, such as the Woodstock Folk Festival Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008, but talking to him you'll quickly learn that his world is much bigger than such honors.

Or as he writes, "Our folk music is a bearer of history and custom, and has grown by being needed and used. ... (It) represents something so much larger and far-reaching than what the iTunes store or a CD bin can hold."

www.markdvorak.com