

NO DEPRESSION

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Screen Door

A PLACE FOR SONGS

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I'm not 100% sure that I'm a folk musician in any pure sense of the definition. I grew up around plenty of old gospel music, but other than that initial baptism, I never really immersed myself in any one traditional idiom. I feel more like a musical mongrel, a mutt who just happens to love hunting for good songs. But I have come to believe that just about everything that's essential to the formation of folk music—history, place, sustainability, and community—has been essential to my music.

Karin Bergquist and I were small-town Ohio kids. We met at a Quaker liberal arts college where we both studied classical music (although Karin says classical music is just fancy folk music). But what really kept us up at night was the infinite possibility of writing songs of our own.

We migrated to Cincinnati and when we discovered a neighborhood called Over-the-Rhine, we couldn't believe our eyes. It was like someone had picked up a small European city, flown it across the Atlantic Ocean, and dropped it whole near the banks of the Ohio River. I found a third-story apartment right on Main Street between 12th and 13th. Rent was \$100 per month—just right for a young aspiring songwriter. I could walk out my front door, look south down Main Street, and see a small piece of the old Riverfront Stadium, home of the Cincinnati Reds, down by the river.

It seemed like we were on sacred ground. There were hints all around us of music that could have only been made in America. Stephen Foster, the father of American songwriting, had lived in Cincinnati as a young man and had walked these same streets. Fats Waller had been the house organist at the historic, almost decrepit Emery Theatre one block away, and he had evolved into a walking jukebox of ragtime, Dixieland, jazz, swing, and stride. Hank Williams, referred to by some as The Hillbilly



Shakespeare, recorded "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" just a few blocks west. Were they all somehow beckoning us to join the chorus?

We were starting a band and we needed a name. Maybe nobody would mind if we just borrowed the name of this old neighborhood, this odd prepositional phrase: Over the Rhine.

We recorded our very first handful of songs on a Tascam reel-to-reel 8-track in the spring of 1989. I guess that means for a brief moment, we were an '80s band. Upstairs in my bedroom, I think my hands shook a little as I plugged in my tape recorder and scribbled the first line of the first Over the Rhine song: *Eyes wide open to the great train robbery of my soul...*

As young writers, Karin and I never relocated to Nashville, or LA, or New York, although we were encouraged from time to time to do just that. I'm sure we missed out on opportunities, and we certainly felt the gravitational pull. But what about all those American writers and artists we were discovering that had a place associated with their work? Flannery O'Connor, Robert Frost, Georgia O'Keeffe, Wendell Berry, Aretha Franklin—they were all from somewhere.

Ohio was our place.

The years passed, and we kept making our music. We kept taking our songs out on the road. We kept trying to

become better writers. In the end, that's the only business plan that matters to an artist: Keep going. You either do or you don't.

And a community of people coalesced around our music. The mailing list we started early on quickly grew to about 10,000 names. We would gather a group of friends together for a week and sit around a table and staple letters together that I had handwritten and photocopied. Postage cost a few thousand dollars. Of course, the old newsletters with licked stamps and handwriting gave way to emails, but we were always curious about the people who were finding our music.

Eventually, Karin and I came to realize we needed a refuge from the road. We wanted something different to return to, a place where we could take a deep breath and hold still. We found a hideaway farm about 45 miles east of Cincinnati, a piece of unpaved earth to call home.

And we couldn't resist inviting our extended musical family to come find us on the farm. We began restoring a barn from the 1870s, turning it into our own music venue. In 2016, we began hosting Nowhere Else Festival every Memorial Day Weekend, inviting some of the great musicians, writers, visual artists, and filmmakers we had met over the years to gather for a weekend of music, art, big skies, some good food, and conversation.

So as I sit in an upstairs bedroom in our old farmhouse, sipping a cup of strong coffee, I think about how 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of Over the Rhine—three whole decades of writing, recording, and life on the road.

It makes me wonder: Am I a folk musician? I'm still not sure. But I know the place I make my music matters. I know that every story begins with those who came before. I know that I play a small part in something big. And good music always brings people together.